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Final Thesis

**Death Waters**

Weaponization of Thirst in the Gaza Strip

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## **Abstract:**

Il lavoro di tesi finale a cui vorrei dedicarmi riguarda una delle zone più attenzionate al mondo dal 7 ottobre 2023: la regione Palestinese e Israeliana. Partendo dagli eventi del colonialismo d'insediamento, dell'espropriazione delle terre, e della cancellazione della popolazione indigena palestinese da parte del progetto sionista, mi occuperò di esaminare come tutti questi elementi abbiano avuto fino ad ora successo non solo per la superiorità bellica e tecnologica di Israele, o per l'appoggio internazionale che riceve, ma anche a causa di un elemento che spesso non è considerato abbastanza nella cronaca mainstream: il controllo delle risorse chiave, come l'acqua. Per contestualizzare la ricerca, farò riferimento ad un retroterra filosofico che non soltanto fornisce gli strumenti per comprendere le società odierne e i loro conflitti interni ed esterni, ma che è stato, paradossalmente, anche d'ispirazione per la stessa occupazione israeliana. Mi appoggerò, dunque, alla filosofia francese del dopoguerra, e a concetti come biopotere, biopolitica, necropolitica, e tecnopolitica, per far luce sugli ingranaggi che permettono e hanno permesso la costruzione di uno stato di apartheid in Palestina. Dopo aver chiarito, attraverso queste coordinate di pensiero, il quadro israelo-palestinese, presenterò come la risorsa idrica sia stata militarizzata ed inserita nella lista degli elementi utili per soggiogare la popolazione palestinese durante la Guerra su Gaza iniziata nell'ottobre del 2023 dopo l'attacco di Hamas, incoraggiando la pulizia etnica e l'evacuazione forzata. Questo avviene ed è avvenuto grazie a due tecniche in particolare. Prima di tutto, fondamentale è stato il controllo della narrativa attorno alla presenza o meno di acqua, allo stato di salute di fiumi, laghi e falde acquifere, alla presunta presenza di minacce in territori vitali per l'approvvigionamento idrico palestinese, giustificando l'occupazione di porzioni sempre più larghe del territorio e delle sue risorse. In secondo luogo, è stato centrale il controllo fisico e militare delle terre, dei confini, dei corpi palestinesi, della qualità e quantità di risorse idriche (e non) cui possono avere accesso, anche tramite la criminalizzazione di qualsiasi progetto palestinese nel settore idrico. Entrambi i punti riflettono lo squilibrio di potere tra le parti, tanto che Mark Zeiton definisce il pervasivo controllo di Israele sul settore idrico come idro-egemonia, e diversi autori parleranno dell'intero apparato socio-politico coinvolto come idro-apartheid. Il caso della distruzione di Gaza sarà presentato come l'apice della violenta politica di dominio sull'acqua, tanto da arrivare a privare la popolazione della quantità minima di sopravvivenza. In tal proposito, la tesi sarà supportata da alcune testimonianze personali provenienti da civili residenti nella

Striscia di Gaza che ho personalmente contattato. Accingendosi alla lettura della seguente tesi, è di estrema importanza osservare che, le condizioni catastrofiche in cui versa il popolo palestinese di Gaza dopo la devastante campagna militare israeliana, le scarse risorse materiali ed energetiche, l'instabilità della tregua attualmente in vigore nel 2025, così come la limitata connessione internet sono tutti fattori che hanno influenzato notevolmente gli sforzi e la vastità dei campioni di testimoni che è stata raccolta.

The final thesis I wish to undertake concerns one of the regions most closely scrutinized in the world since October 7, 2023: the Palestinian and Israeli region. Beginning with the events of settler colonialism, land expropriation, and the erasure of the indigenous Palestinian population by the Zionist project, I will examine how these elements have succeeded thus far, not only due to Israel's military and technological superiority or the international support it receives, but also because of an element often insufficiently considered in mainstream reporting: the control of key resources, such as water. To contextualize this research, I will refer to a philosophical background that not only provides the tools to understand contemporary societies and their internal and external conflicts, but which has also, paradoxically, served as inspiration for the Israeli occupation itself. I will therefore draw upon post-war French philosophy and concepts such as biopower, biopolitics, necropolitics, and technopolitics to shed light on the mechanisms that enable and have enabled the construction of an apartheid state in Palestine. After clarifying the Israeli-Palestinian framework through these coordinates of thought, I will present how the water resource has been militarized and added to the list of elements used to subjugate the Palestinian population during the War on Gaza that began in October 2023 following the Hamas attack, encouraging ethnic cleansing and forced evacuation. This occurs and has occurred thanks to two techniques in particular. First, fundamental has been the control of the narrative surrounding the presence or absence of water, the health status of rivers, lakes, and aquifers, and the alleged presence of threats in territories vital for Palestinian water supply, thereby justifying the occupation of ever-larger portions of territory and its resources. Second, central has been the physical and military control of lands, borders, Palestinian bodies, and the quality and quantity of water (and other) resources they can access, including through the criminalization of any Palestinian project in the water sector. Both points reflect the power imbalance between the parties, so much so that Mark Zeiton defines Israel's pervasive control over the water sector as hydro-hegemony, and several authors will refer to the entire socio-political apparatus involved as hydro-apartheid.

The case of the destruction of Gaza will be presented as the apex of the violent policy of water domination, to the point of depriving the population of the minimum amount needed for survival. In this regard, the thesis will be supported by several personal testimonies from civilian residents of the Gaza Strip whom I have personally contacted. Approaching the reading of this thesis, it is extremely important to note that the catastrophic conditions of the Palestinian people in Gaza following the devastating Israeli military campaign, the scarcity of material and energy resources, the instability of the truce currently in effect in 2025, as well as limited internet connectivity, are all factors that have significantly influenced the efforts and the extent of the sample of witnesses collected.

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“Palestine has a role in this planet. Surviving is not only rational. It is spiritual. Palestine brings humanity back to this balance. Palestine asks: ‘Today me, but tomorrow who will it be?’ It is a question of survival for all humanity.”

*Saber, pseudonym*

With love,  
to all my friends and beloved people of Gaza.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Water has always been a contested resource in Palestine. Since the first days of the British and Zionist colonial presence in the region, water courses, swamps, and groundwater have been diverted, redirected, enclosed by dams, and cleansed. Throughout the decades, water engineering and management, among other natural resources, has become part of the projects aimed to foster colonial expansions, political and military affirmation, and simultaneously a tool of oppression and subordination for Palestinian people. In the Gaza Strip, however, its transformation into a weapon reached an unprecedented intensity during the 2023-2025 siege, configuring what the United Nations has defined as an “unprecedented water crisis” and a “warfare consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war”<sup>1</sup>.

Hence, the aim of this thesis focuses to investigate:

- How was Israel able to make the entire Strip die of thirst during the last siege 2023-2025? Which were the military and political actions, and which the conceptual, philosophical, and historical premises that made it possible?
- Which were the main consequences for the population, both in terms of immediate survival and social disintegration?

The relevance of this research lies in the urgency of documenting and understanding a phenomenon that, while rooted in decades of occupation and discriminatory policies, had undergone a dramatic acceleration in recent months. As Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, stated, “I want to remind Israel that consciously preventing supplies needed for safe water from entering the Gaza Strip violated both international humanitarian and human rights law. [...] Israel must stop using water as a weapon of war [...]”.

Under Article 7 of the Rome Statute, intentionally depriving the civilian population of conditions of life, calculated to bring about their destruction, is an act of extermination and classified as a crime against humanity”<sup>2</sup>.

The beginning of this research had started from collecting personal experiences of people living, or that spent most of their lives, in the Gaza Strip. I had the opportunity to reach some of them through social networks or via personal connections that gave me their contacts. In support of their words, they shared with me many videos and pictures, which helped to

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<sup>1</sup> Sarsour et al., “Parched and Imperil”, 10, UNU CRIS Report

<sup>2</sup> UN The Question of Palestine, 17 November, 2023

visually grasp the exhausting experiences and the feeling of desolation that Gaza transpires due to the devastation. However, the distance and the impossibility of traveling to a war zone effectively deprived the ethnographic experience of field involvement and observation, but also of the communicative aspects that would have emerged if I had met the interlocutors in person. This aspect will be emphasized in the chapter dedicated to Methods, in which I describe my work as semi-ethnographic research. Indeed, in order to understand what is happening in the Strip, it is necessary to recount the facts in a contextualized manner, both historically and conceptually. With semi-ethnographic research, then, I mean that I combined, through an interdisciplinary approach, the ethnographic material collected at a distance with historical analysis, philosophical inquiries, international reports and articles, and academic materials. To frame the Gaza massacres, I dedicated the first part of the dissertation, consisted into two introductory chapters, to the analysis of the historical context within a specific theoretical framework.

Firstly, in the next chapter I will provide an historical bird's eye view on the Israeli colonization and occupation of Palestinians lands through the concept of eco-settler colonialism. Indeed, here I will examine how the colonial domain over land and people necessarily pass through the control of natural resources. Forestal and reservoirs conservation, agricultural practices, urbanistic conception of the space, and, of course, engineering hydraulic projects and interventions are an integral part of the colonial process of expansion since its inception. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Broich, Alatout, Sasa, Gasteyer et al., Mashaqi et al.<sup>3</sup>, this chapter demonstrates that the environmental segregation and injustice are not a mere byproduct of conflict, but a systematic appropriation of land and water resources in all the historical Palestine, which constitute a deliberate strategy of societal replacement and colonial ecological violence<sup>4</sup>. Along the chapter, I traced the evolution of water grabbing and policies, from the early Zionist settlements through the establishment of the 1967 occupation and the subsequent Oslo Accords, showing how each phase has progressively entrenched Israeli control over Palestinians' water, while fragmenting their territorial continuity and agricultural lifeways.

The third chapter goes deep into the interpretative reading of such ecological and colonial violence, by developing a theoretical framework based on four interconnected philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> Broich, "British Water Policy in Mandate Palestine; Alatout, "'States' of scarcity: water, space, and identity politics in Israel, 1948-59"; Sasa, "Oppressive Pines"; Gasteyer, et al., "Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective"; Mashaqi et al., "Ecology of Erasure"

<sup>4</sup> Bacon, "Settler Colonialism as Eco-social Structure", 59

paradigms. First, through Foucault's concept of biopolitics, it examines how water management functions as a technology of power that differentially regulates populations – fostering the life and flourishing of Israeli citizens while systematically undermining Palestinian bodily integrity and social reproduction.

On the same vein, the Mbembe's category of necropolitics frames the Palestinian lives' conditions, where water deprivation, military attacks on water facilities, and violations of water sovereignty operate as a form of slow death. This condition creates what Mbembe calls 'death worlds' in which Palestinians are reduced to the status of the living dead, suspended between life and death through the calculated withholding of the most basic element for survival <sup>5</sup>. For this reason, I relied on the Agamben's state of exception to illustrate how the Palestinian water conditions, especially in the Gaza case, is a perfect example of the 'state of exception', as it constitutes a space of juridical vacuum where normal legal protections are suspended <sup>6</sup>. Here, one of the ways in which Israeli power exercises its dominion is through controlling their ability to take, conserve and use water. By depriving Palestinians of almost any means, forcing them to rely on minimum quantities of drinking water, the Israeli colonial exceptional power reduces them to 'bare lives' <sup>7</sup>. This condition pushes them to the limits of survival and exposes them to an incalculable level harm. Their lives are transformed into mere existence and put in constant risk of death, or fearing of death, to the point that life itself becomes just a suspended space, while waiting to die.

As a result, according to Zeitoun, Israel configures as a hydro-hegemony in the region, exercising its monopoly of power through various forms, from the most brutal and coercive, to the softer and ideal <sup>8</sup>. Attacking water facilities, establishing unequal water distributions through legal escamotages, or fostering a propagandistic narrative and promoting false cooperation agreements – are all facts that reflect the unbalance of contractual power between Israelis and Palestinians. Such branched out power is what Deleuze and Guattari describe with the term rhizome, for which Israel's power is not exercised mainly through centralized command, rather it operates in a capillary, diffuse manner, branching through fragmentation of space, chaotic and simultaneous military assaults, bureaucratic procedures, and infrastructure networks <sup>9</sup>. The second part of the thesis, which comprehends the two final

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<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 109

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11

<sup>7</sup> Agamben, *Ibid.*, 10-11

<sup>8</sup> Zeitoun, *Power and Water in the Middle East*, 26-29

<sup>9</sup> Adkins, "*Deleuze and Guattari's*, A Thousand Plateaus", 22; James, "Israeli Deleuzian Forces, Or the 'theorywashing' of occupation"

chapters, is finally dedicated to the semi-ethnographic research on the Gaza Strip.

The methodology chapter presents detailly what the semi-ethnographic research consists of, namely an approach necessitated by the impossibility of conducting traditional fieldwork in an active war zone. The methodology describes the combination analysis of reports from international organizations, UN agencies, and NGOs with systematic examination of journalistic sources and, crucially, the direct testimonies collected through media and social media platforms. The semi-ethnographic character of this research acknowledges both the limitations imposed by distance and the ethical imperative to centre the Palestinian voices. Rather than treating these testimonies as mere data points, I seek to preserve their narrative integrity while subjecting them to rigorous analytical scrutiny with the help of the other documental materials. In the absence of fieldwork, these voices constituted the primary medium through which the lived reality of the siege can be apprehended.

The last chapter offers the empirical studies of the water situation in Gaza before and after October 7, 2023, examining quantitative and qualitative data on water access, infrastructure destruction, and health consequences. I will highlight the precipitous decline from an already precarious pre-war situation – where already more than 95% of Gaza's water was unfit for human consumption – to the catastrophic conditions of the siege. Conditions have been so dire, that the population has been reduced to drink 4,74 litre per person per day, far below the Sphere standards for humanitarian emergencies <sup>10</sup>.

Through detailed examination of the systematic targeting of water infrastructure – including desalination plants, pumping stations, wells, pipelines, and wastewater treatment facilities - the chapter documents how water has been transformed from a basic human right into a weapon of mass destruction. Throughout this analysis, the chapter gives sustained attention to the testimonies of those who have lived through this catastrophe, allowing their words to illuminate the human dimensions of data that might otherwise remain abstract.

What emerges from this research is a picture of systematic violence in which water is weaponized as a tool of mass destruction and as an extension of the colonial battlefield. It is a silent and slow way of killing, whose effects are no less lethal than explosives. By documenting this reality, the thesis aims to contribute both to academic debate on the connections between water, conflict, and power, and to the documentation necessary for future accountability efforts. It is, above all, an attempt to respond to a cry for help – to give analytical form to an injustice that cannot remain unanswered.

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<sup>10</sup> OXFAM, “Water War Crimes”, 10

# PART I

## 2. ISRAEL: AN HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF ECOLOGICAL SETTLER COLONY

Discussions surrounding the colonial nature of Israel, the legitimacy of its claims as well as the Palestinians' ones, and the political viability of the "two people-two state" solution have always been fervent. Given the Hamas attack of the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2023 and the consequent Israeli military assault and occupation of Gaza, with devastating consequences for the resident population, the attention around Palestinian cause has caught a central role in political discourses and diplomatic efforts.

Videos posted on social media by soldiers themselves, who, amused, shoot into crowds searching for food <sup>11</sup>, mock and torture blindfolded and stripped civilians <sup>12</sup>; attacks on schools, hospitals and noncombatant people <sup>13</sup>; videos and photos recorded by settlers themselves, blocking and destroying humanitarian aid bound for Gaza <sup>14</sup>; the increasingly extreme messianic and racist statements by politicians and prominent figures that strongly encourage a permanent occupation of Gaza <sup>15</sup>;

a widespread, if not almost total, consensus for the Palestinian ethnic cleansing among the Israeli civilian population <sup>16</sup> — all of this has shaken the attitude of the global civil society.

One of the striking and historical consequences occurred in January 2024, when the

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<sup>11</sup> Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, "New evidence confirms Israel's full involvement in 'Flour Massacre'; UNHR, "UN experts condemn 'flour massacre' "

<sup>12</sup> Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, "In testimonies to Euro-Med Monitor"; "Hostages of Israeli revenge in the Gaza Strip"

<sup>13</sup> UNHR, "Thematic Report – Attacks on Hospitals"; Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Israeli School Strikes Magnify Civilian Peril"; University of Cambridge et al., "Palestinian Education Under Attack in Gaza"

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera, "Israeli settlers block Gaza-bound aid trucks"; Wissamgaza, "At the Karm Abu Salem Crossing", Instagram post

<sup>15</sup> UNHR, "Israel seeks permanent control of Gaza"; Middle East Monitor, "Israeli officials call for permanent occupation of Gaza"; Human Rights Council, "Legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza", 64

<sup>16</sup> Scheindlin, "A Grim Poll Showed Most Jewish Israelis Support Expelling Gazans", Haaretz; Rapaport, "Nearly half of Israelis support army killing all Palestinians in Gaza", Middle East Eye; Hermann et al., "Large Majority of Jewish Israelis", The Israel Democracy Institute

International Court of Justice ordered Israel to adopt immediate measures to protect civilians in Gaza, for there have been plausible risks of genocide <sup>17</sup>.

Such events occurred within the well-known broader framework of the Israeli occupation on those the International Law considers Palestinian territories and in the context of apartheid for the Palestinian people <sup>18</sup>.

To understand the conditions imposed to Gazans during the devastating siege starting after the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, and how it was possible for Israel to easily deprive them from water, I deem fundamental contextualizing the premises that made it possible.

In this chapter I am going to show an historical basis supported by numerous scholars that consider Israel a form of settler colony <sup>19</sup>.

I will begin with defining what settler colonialism means, which constitutes the material and historical foundations of domination. I will then show its ecological dimension and how it constitutes a pivotal element to pursue colonial goals. By specifying such framework, I will lay the groundwork for reading the Zionist project not merely as an occupation of land, but as a total war against an entire socio-ecological metabolism, where control over natural resources, such as water, constitutes the primordial act of conquest and the precondition for the creation of a new ethnic geography. This gives me the opportunity to draw a general picture allowing the reader to understand why management of natural resources, like water, matter when a national power wants to ‘re-semanticize’ occupied territories for political interests. It doesn’t intend to be an exhaustive reading of the Palestine/Israel history, rather only the essential events crucial for the purpose of the thesis will be discussed.

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<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Council, *Ibid.*, 64, 71

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, “Israel’s Apartheid Against Palestinians”; Dessì, “Israeli Apartheid and the West’s Dwindling Moral Credibility”; Human Rights Council, “Human Rights Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”

<sup>19</sup> Here some scholars that are of this mind: Veracini, “The Other Shift”; Lloyd, “Settler Colonialism”; Salamanca et al., “Past is Present”; Pappè, *La Pulizia Etnica della Palestina*; Lloyd, Wolfe, “Settler Colonial Logic”; Pappè, *Brevissima Storia del conflitto tra Israele e Palestina*

## 2.1 Settler colonialism

To showcase why I will refer to Israel as an eco-settler colonial entity and to demonstrate how it has been weaponizing natural resources, it is necessary to inspect some terms I am going to use throughout the thesis, and the precise school of thought and political horizon I position in. For this purpose, I will use analytical concepts from decolonial studies, which are popularly considered overcoming the post-colonialist theories in the last decades. Indeed, they accuse postcolonialism to be an indirect agent of Eurocentrism for its association with post-modernism. This is because, despite the intent to produce radical and alternative knowledge, “they produced the epistemic schema of Area Studies of the United States”<sup>20</sup>. As Grosfoguel highlighted, a real epistemological decolonial perspective needs to consider all the fundamentalisms (not only the European ones), namely requiring a broader canon of epistemic thoughts which leads us towards a *pluriversal* opposed to a *universal* image of the world. It is also fundamental that the decolonial studies do not replicate the same mistakes of postcolonial studies, namely producing studies *about* the subaltern by maintaining a legacy of colonialism, rather work hard to include studies and analysis *from* and *with* subaltern perspectives<sup>21</sup>. Within the decolonial studies, some authors begun to talk about a differentiation between a ‘classical colonialism’ and ‘settler colonialism’. What differentiate settler colonialism from the classical one is that the latter is characterized by the exploitation and control of indigenous labour, with the colonizers’ intentions to extract as much wealth as possible<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, unlike the settler usurpers, in Latin America Iberian colonizers would be a minority in front of a vast indigenous population now reduced to servitude that can become in any moment insurgent<sup>23</sup>. In contrast, for the settler colonial cases, a logic of elimination is in force: Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini define it as a structure oriented towards the erasure and replacement of indigenous populations, their cultures, economies and political organizations on a territory for the sake of establishing their own<sup>24</sup>. Indigenous are considered non-existent and culturally and physically restricted in principle; their land is deemed *terra nullius* and thus colonizers think they can declare their power over it, hunting

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<sup>20</sup> Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn”, 211

<sup>21</sup> Grosfoguel, *Ibid.*, 211

<sup>22</sup> Mendoza, “Decolonial Theories”, 4

<sup>23</sup> Mendoza, *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>24</sup> Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology and Environmental Justice”, 11

and eliminating people that belong to that socio-environmental context. Wolfe claims that settler colonialism is carried out by a group of people coming from overseas, who come on a land which they do not belong to and with the pre-meditated intention to permanently establish in there <sup>25</sup>. Settlers design the migratory project precisely with the desire to establish a new political and social order, requiring the displacement and replacement of indigenous people to become the ‘real natives’ <sup>26</sup>. Such process never happens without brutality, for those lands are never really empty. In Australia, a classical example of settler colonialism, there have been at least 270 massacres of throughout the 140 years of British settler domain, without counting the countless deaths for epidemics and armed struggles <sup>27</sup>.

To permanently settling in the new land, colonizers do not completely leave behind the societies they come from: they always seek to replicate them in the new place. For this reason, they make a difference between the figure of the settler and of the refugee, who already comes at a territory already pre-configured. Refugees and migrants look for inclusion in a pre-established order and do not wish to create a new one, this is why they stand to the opposite pole than the settler: they come involuntarily or pushed by personal needs, and without a preliminary plan <sup>28</sup>. Nonetheless Ilan Pappè states that settlers are often ostracized in their territories of origin: an example is the North America, colonized by people fleeing religious persecutions in Europe <sup>29</sup>. However interesting and relevant, this essential and insurmountable binary between exploitation colonialism and settler colonialism has limitations. For instance, Shannon Speed, one of the Indigenous scholars in North America, criticizes the irreconcilability between these two forms of colonialism, affirming that settler colonialism has often been constitutive part of exploitation colonialism. In Latin America, Indigenous peoples were forced to work as slaves in the same lands they had been expropriated from; furthermore, Spanish colonizers did not come at South America to leave one day, rather to stay and impose a new order based on the traditions of their origin homeland <sup>30</sup>. Although I acknowledge the reasonable critics about the necessity of distinguishing these two types of colonialisms, I deem the settler colonialist theory an interesting starting point to define the State of Israel. To understand why Israel can be called a settler colony since its first origins, it is important that we do start to refer to the ‘Israel/Palestine issue’ without terms like ‘conflict’

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<sup>25</sup> Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 116

<sup>26</sup> Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Natives”, 389

<sup>27</sup> Pappè, *Brevissima storia del conflitto tra Israele e Palestina*, 39

<sup>28</sup> Mendoza, *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>29</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 39-40

<sup>30</sup> Speed, “Structures of Settler Colonialism in Abya Yala”, 783-90

or ‘struggle’. Why is this region always on the verge of wars, battle zones, violence and scattering of blood? Can we talk about a real conflict between two nations with equal recognition from the international community?

To honestly read the context, it is morally and academically necessary to use the right words and terminologies. This is why the language code I am going to employ throughout the following thesis to deal with the Israeli Palestinian situation intends to highlight the colonial goals behind the Israeli political aspirations. According to Patrick Wolfe, the expropriation of land in a colonial context can be achieved through two possible relations to indigenous population: the subordination of indigenous labour force, as it happened in much of Latin America, Algeria and South Africa, or their extermination, as it was the case of Australia, North America and the Caribbean.

Israel has engaged in both tendencies: while depending on Palestinian labour, it has always given way to a simultaneous systematic, gradual displacement and marginalization of Palestinians. Colonialisms of this kind constitute themselves through the process of occupation of a territory by a minority which exercises its power over the indigenous majority. In this sense, settler colonialism such as the Israeli one is a complex social formation and multifaceted process rather than a onetime ‘historical event’<sup>31</sup>.

## **2.2 Ecological dimension in settler colonialism**

Looking closely at processes of settler colonial domination, it is remarkable the relevance of the ecological dimension, which comprehends relationships between living organisms and the physical environment.

By seeking to establish their own homelands, settler populations work “to create their own ecologies out the ecologies of Indigenous peoples, which often requires that settlers bring in additional materials and living beings (e.g., plants, animals) from abroad”<sup>32</sup>.

To impose their own imported social, political and economic system, settler communities transform the rooted indigenous eco-social equilibrium between the pre-existent elements and upset the interconnections that occurred between and among them. In other words, “the value of places and beings are redefined by the culture of the colonizers”<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, to assert control over the land and all its inhabitants, settler colonial practices make

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<sup>31</sup> Wolfe, *Ibid.*, 388

<sup>32</sup> Whyte, *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Bacon, “Settler Colonialism as Eco-social Structure”, 63

also use of environmental governance and communication strategies around the right or wrong use of natural resources and land. This type of politics combines capitalist interests and environmental management. Such articulation of the governance is very much in line with what Fletcher calls ‘sovereign environmentality’ coined on the Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’<sup>34</sup>. It corresponds to a ‘command-and-control’ approach for which protected areas are institutionalised, some activities are forbidden, and transgressors are punished. The fact is that these strategies to control human behaviours, in the case of settler colonialism, are intrinsically discriminatory and ghettoizing, as the rules are made with the purpose of destabilizing the indigenous group in favour of the settlers, who are entitled of different treatments. Therefore, they outcome in the creation of unequal, disparate societies, where the care of the environment is instrumentalized for colonial aims, and its conservation is not even guaranteed, rather often worsened. To develop the settlers’ community, the governance of environmentality does not include only extraction of natural resources, rather it consists in a total reordering of the indigenous ecosystems, appropriation and instrumentalization of indigenous knowledge and a disruption of human-land-more-than-human relations. Thus, first aim of settler colonialism is not to occupy a territory, rather to materially, culturally, and symbolically reshape it into something unfamiliar to the indigenous peoples in favour of colonialists’ interests<sup>35</sup>. Settler colonies then constituted eco-social structure resulting in highly destructive outcomes. By impeding the possibility of relationships with familiar ecologies, settler colonial land management contributes to physical, emotional, economic, and cultural harms of native beings, both human and non-human. According to Bacon, it also produces and maintains enduring inequalities between Natives and settlers: “This structure disrupts indigenous eco-social relations, and in so doing produces what I call colonial ecological violence, which results in particular risks and harms experienced by Native peoples and communities”<sup>36</sup>. With ‘ecological violence’ Bacon means the mechanisms bringing eco-social disruption, which include redistribution and privatization of lands, pollution, and renomination of places, cultural practices, and identities with no input or consent on the part of the original inhabitants<sup>37</sup>.

Israel is not exonerated from all these dynamics: to underline the impacts on ecological

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<sup>34</sup> Fletcher, “Environmentality unbound”, 4-5

<sup>35</sup> Abbas, “Erasing the Land, Resisting the Silence”, 20

<sup>36</sup> Bacon, *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>37</sup> Bacon, *Ibid.*, 64

balance, I will refer to it as an eco-settler entity<sup>38</sup>. Zionist practices have consistently made instrumental use of the natural environment and the manipulation of territorial spaces. To render the region more amenable to colonial needs, military objectives, and territorial expansion, numerous modifications have been introduced—many of them significantly disruptive to the pre-existing human and non-human ecosystemic balance. Furthermore, from the outset, the Israeli colonial administration has implemented a discriminatory redistribution and management of resources with the aim of removing Palestinians from their ancestral lands or, at the very least, making their lives as difficult as possible. with the aim of removing Palestinians from their ancestral lands or, at the very least, making their lives as difficult as possible.

Therefore, rather than conflict, or war or oppositions, we should talk about colonialism, more specifically of eco-settler colonialism, which has had devastating consequences on Palestinian humans, non-humans and the entire environment. In the following sections I will clarify which are the historical events that make explicit the colonial intentions behind the Israeli politics, often relying on strategic environmental management and weaponization of natural resources, like water, to achieve its goals.

## **2.3 Zionism and planification of the environment for the New Jewish Home**

It is important to analyse deeply what I mean when I say ‘Zionism’, for it is the base on which the entire colonial project is erected.

Firstly, the Zionist intellectual movement has had numerous currents and diversified periods. However, it was in Europe during the end of XIX century that among Jews the idea of a Jewish home started to take ground on the wave of a general increasing of nationalist sentiments all around the world, particularly in the West<sup>39</sup>. There are different reasons for that: just to start, for the growing antisemitism in eastern and central Europe during the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century. Nationalisms were spreading all around and Jews were seen as foreign elements settled in other nations. The Zionist movement would

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<sup>38</sup> For this interpretation I refer to Bacon, “Settler Colonialism as Eco-social Structure”; Hughes et al., “Greenwashing in Palestine/Israel”; Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology”; Sasa, “Oppressive Pines”; Amira, “Slow Violence”, Mashaqi et al., “Ecology of Erasure”

<sup>39</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*; Gelvin, *Israel Palestine Conflict*

have assured the foundation of a Jewish homeland where all Jews could find safety and shelter. However, at the beginning, the Zionist sentiment was not popular at all, for convincing thousands of people that had been living in Europe for centuries to move in another territory was not easy. Indeed, many Jews joined socialist and communist parties, convinced that revolution and the overturning of the capitalist system would have been a democratic and liberal society where they could have lived free from oppression. Yet because of the Russian pogroms before (especially the one of 1881, which was the bloodiest), the Nazis/Fascist persecutions after, numerous waves of migration occurred. These migrations, called *Alyah* in Hebrew, were accompanied by important purchases of Palestinian lands, thanks to money provided by agencies like Jewish National Fund. Nonetheless, the first Zionist colonizers were mostly former university students without any previous agricultural knowledge: differing from the old Yishuv, the Jewish community originating from Palestinian lands, they did never assimilate in the new cultural context, rather already in the first propaganda they portrayed Palestinian indigenous as strangers in their own land, or usurpers of Jewish lands which expected to them for divine rights. Another reason that made the Zionist ideology increase during the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX was the Jewish nationalism risen in the same years: Jewish intellectuals thought that a homeland could be an opportunity to read the traditional religious texts in a modern key, to demonstrate that Jews had the right to return and repopulate the Palestinian land, refunding the ancient Great Israel. Among Zionists, Theodor Herzl was the founder of the World Zionist Organization in 1897, which stated that the aim of Zionism was to create a home in Palestine for the Jews, secured by public law <sup>40</sup>. The most influential narrative was that Palestine was a *terra nullius*, a plenty of land to settle, for it consisted in a perfect solution to the problem of Jews: ‘a land without people for a people without a land’ <sup>41</sup>. Even if it was a recognition that there were autochthone populations there, the contention was that they were not using the land to its maximum potential. Today, by ‘inhabitants of Palestine’ or ‘Palestinian indigenous’, scholars refer to Arab and Jewish Palestinians, that during the XIX-XX century counted approximately 758.000 persons: 85% of it was composed by Arab Muslims, 10-11% was composed by Christians, mostly Arabs, and 4-5% was Jewish <sup>42</sup>. However, at that time Herzl was not optimist for a pacific coexistence. For example, he claimed in his manifesto/novel: “If I wish

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<sup>40</sup> Gelvin, *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>41</sup> Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*; Muir, “A land without a people for a people without a land”, 55-62

<sup>42</sup> Kamel, *Terra Contesa*, 48-57

to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct”<sup>43</sup>, and in his diaries of the 1895 he expressed his hope for the disappearance of Palestinian indigenous<sup>44</sup>. Through the following years, the Zionist movement understood that it was necessary to convince some important international powers to stand for its project, thus numerous pro-Zionist lobbies were required to press Great Britain to contribute to the creation of the Jewish homeland. A powerful pro-Zionist lobby was created in Great Britain, composed by Christians who wanted the return of Jews for religious reasons, by antisemitic who wanted Jews out of their land, and by aristocrats that considered Palestine as a dump for socialist and communist Jews<sup>45</sup>. Two years passed before the British government was convinced that the control over the Palestinian lands could be strategic for the Empire, especially for reasons around the defence of the Suez Canal. In 1917, it firmed the Balfour Declaration, promising to make Palestine ‘a national home for the Jewish people’<sup>46</sup>.

After the First World War and the Ottoman Empire fall, the British government was about to begin its mandate in that region that today we call the ‘Historical Palestine’. It was during these years that it started to rule the territory under the Balfour formula by assuring the creation of a Jewish national home and facilitating further Jewish migration and their settlement. By relying on the support of one of the greatest power in the world, the Zionist propaganda went from an attempt to build a home for Jews in Palestine (although without considering the habitants that already lived on the land), to a real colonization movement which aimed to expropriate the territories as a necessity to assure safety for the Jews. Already before the 20s of the XX century, the Zionist leaders had dreamt about the expulsion of Palestinians: some thought that they would have emigrated spontaneously if they had received an adequate compensation, on the contrary they would have been forcibly removed<sup>47</sup>.

Policies of forcing population removal and transfer have occurred several times in history, although this phenomenon have been intensified in the late XIX and XX centuries<sup>48</sup>.

Such campaigns are broadly known with the term ‘ethnic cleansing’. Despite its definition is blurred and does not meet the unanimous agreement of scholars, ethnic cleansing “can be understood as the expulsion of an “undesirable” population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a

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<sup>43</sup> Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the elimination of the natives”, 2006

<sup>44</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>45</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>46</sup> Gelvin, *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>47</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 37-44 (my translation)

<sup>48</sup> Bell-Fialkoff, “A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing”, 110

combination of these”<sup>49</sup>. Among the population that have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, the North America’s Indigenous are a crucial example: in order to settle and secure the frontier, European colonizers slowly get rid of the most Indians from their lands. The case of American Indigenous became a manual example and a model to pursue in many other colonial contexts for Western settlers: how to manage huge groups of people each other connected by cultural, religious, and social similarities? How to convince them to move from their familiar environment, which has shaped their life experience as individuals and communities for centuries if not millennia?

Laurence Oliphant, a member of the British Parliament, and a mystic and Zionist Christian, who collaborated with the British Society PEF (Palestine Exploration Fund), went so far as to say that: “Arabs [referred to Palestinians] do not have any reason to reclaim our empathy. They turned this country into desert, ruined its villages, and sacked their inhabitants, to the point of reducing everything to this state. We could implement the same system that proved successful in Canada with our North American Tribes. They were settled on their ‘reserves’ where they live peacefully alongside the local farming communities”.<sup>50</sup> These words explicitly identify indigenous Arabs as strangers that ruined a promised land, simultaneously calling for the ‘re-appropriation’ of it through the ethnic cleansing of lands. As in other example of settler colonialism, to accomplish their establishment they also resorted to the dehumanization of natives, portraying them as ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’, while referring to themselves as modernisers of the land. Pappè asserts that this is what differentiate ‘classical colonizers’ and ‘settlers’: the formers consider their existence on the territory as a necessity for the indigenous population to evolve and progress, while the latter intend to enhance the land, not the people. For, many Israelis still think today that before their arrival in Palestine it was consistently a desert that they made flourish. The idea of ‘making the desert bloom’ was consistently a rhetorical tool to justify ecological and demographic interventions in the previous indigenous landscape. Such approach is identified as ‘environmental orientalism’<sup>51</sup>. It refers to a set of ideas developed by European colonial powers about the North African and Middle Eastern landscapes and their people, which influenced social and landscape change and administration in their colonies<sup>52</sup>. Indeed, the Zionists’ plans together with the British policies during the mandate about the redistributing of resources and organization of the

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<sup>49</sup> Bell-Fialkoff, *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>50</sup> Kamel, *Ibid.*, 44 (my translation)

<sup>51</sup> Broich, “British Water Policy in Mandate Palestine”, 260

<sup>52</sup> Broich, *Ibid.*, 261

landscape were strongly guided by the assumptions about a supposed Arabs' and Jews' innate racial inclinations towards land, water and agriculture <sup>53</sup>. As a matter of fact, the British colonial power perceived Jews as having innate tendencies towards modernity that had the duty to lead and correct the alleged Arabs' weakness and incapacity in maintaining land and its resources. In fact, Palestinians were considered as brutal ruiner of that once was the Great Israel, the ancient prolific land flowing with 'milk and honey' <sup>54</sup>. For example, the Palestine government's first attorney general, the British Norman Bentwich, affirmed that "the ancient fertility of the country may be completely restored by an industrious and intelligent population. [...] the application of modern science to its resources will quickly undo the waste of centuries ... It is only a question of irrigation ... Water ... is at present allowed to run to waste" <sup>55</sup>. Water resources management was indeed a pivotal element to pursue the British Mandate and later Zionists' agenda. Irrigation and drainage of some areas, they hoped, were strategic practices to provide intense cultivation of cash crops and solve health issues <sup>56</sup>. For this reason, the water tower, often behind settler cultivating lands, became a usual symbol in Zionist posters emphasizing the opportunities for Jewish settling <sup>57</sup>. Since the first Jewish settlements in Palestine, transformations of land and its use have aided Zionist colonialists' goals: "where Arab cultivators and pastoralists tended to employ extensive land use with little alteration in water landscapes, Jewish agriculturalists tended to practice intense agriculture more dependent on machinery, chemicals and water control. Where Arabs tended to move their animals between water sites and relied on mixed industry at their edges, Jewish farmers and colonisation institutions tended to practice much more intensive water control" <sup>58</sup>. There are numerous studies on the exploitation of water courses by Zionist settlers before the creation of the State of Israel. It is important to remember that the former Ottoman area of Palestine encompassed the contemporary territories of Israel, and of Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip. In terms of water resources, the Coastal Aquifer at the West Coast and the Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, and Dead Sea were areas of interest for the living communities. These resources have been transformed throughout the decades: for instance, early settlements utilised the Coastal Aquifer as part of agricultural and urban development schemes, while the Sea of Galilee was tapped to provide needed water for development <sup>59</sup>. Managing water for

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<sup>53</sup> Borich, *Ibid.*, 260

<sup>54</sup> For further information on the topic, refer to Novick, *Milk and Honey*

<sup>55</sup> Broich, *Ibid.*, 272

<sup>56</sup> Broich, *Ibid.*, 271

<sup>57</sup> Gasteyer, et al., "Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective", 457

<sup>58</sup> Broich, *Ibid.*, 257

<sup>59</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 455

the seek of Zionist settlements was one of the means to demonstrate how they were simultaneously modernising and returning the Holy Land to its former glory. However, the role of water and hydraulic projects as part of a national aspiration and a viable way to help establishing the Jewish presence in the region became clearer during the 30s, with the plans for the construction of the Israeli Mekorot water company, completed in 1964, for which I will dedicate a deeper discussion in the next section <sup>60</sup>.

In few years, many Palestinian communities started to lose their access and use to traditional environmental practices and places because of the obstruction of new settlements. The face of Palestinian landscape started to undergo a transformation that problematically change the relationship between the population and the environment, established for centuries. John Broich writes that “between the late 1920s and 1930s alone, over 200 water supply and reclamation projects transformed the surface of Palestine, with over 150,000 acres being drained or otherwise altered” <sup>61</sup>. Such important modifications of the territory and its resources ultimately aided the ascendancy of one community while handicapping the other. Indeed, until the Ottoman Empire fall, before the first *aliyot*, the Jewish population was about 5% of the entire population; at the beginning of the British mandate it was around 11%, mostly around Jerusalem, but because of British policies, the Jewish population ended up to count 30% of the population by the end of the mandate.<sup>62</sup>

This situation became ever more tense and violence erupted between the Jewish settler and the Palestinian nationalists and civil society, who rebel to the further expansion of Jewish and their almost monopoly on land resources. Additionally, they complained the different and favourable treatment British reserved to Jews colonizers. The mandate authorities allowed Zionist colonizers to set up their own educational systems, industries and even their military capacities. Palestinians, which composed most of the population, were treated as colonial servants: they were forced to follow British educational systems and very lacunose health and Statal services had been imposed to them, much inferior than the Zionists’ counterparts <sup>63</sup>. Because many Arab revolts erupted, British realized that Palestinians would have not agree on the promise of creating a Jewish homeland in their territories, even more after the Zionist movement became more rigid and radicalized during the years of the Second World War. The British government believed that the problem was involving two irreconcilable populations,

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<sup>60</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 459

<sup>61</sup> Broich, *Ibid.*, 257

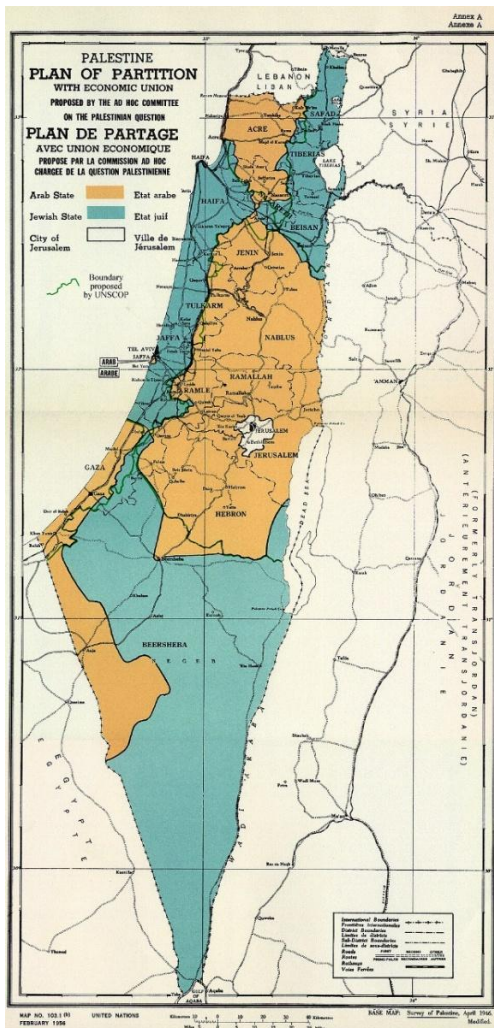
<sup>62</sup> These data are taken from Pappè analysis in his *Brevissima Storia*, 30, and from ISPI, “Israele-Palestina, breve storia di un conflitto impossibile”

<sup>63</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 29-36

and they started to think about a solution that comprehends two states for two people. After some failures, the last serious attempt was taken by the neo-born United Nations (UN), which created a Special Committee to decide the future of the Palestinian territories, called United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). In the 1947, the Committee approved the 181 Resolution, which envisaged the end of the British mandate for the 1948 and defined the partitions of Palestine. It consisted in a complicated map where the Jewish new State would cover 55% of the entire Palestinian territory, while 45% of it would be assigned to Arabs; Jerusalem would assume the international status. This solution gave much more lands to Jews even if they were far less than the Arab population, no mentioning that the 40% of them would have found themselves from one day to another in the Israeli State, which means that 40.000 would have been outside the Arab borders.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, which are the borders of the new State of Israel was never mentioned in the declaration of independence.

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<sup>64</sup> ISPI, Ibid



(Fig. 1) <sup>65</sup>

Before the resolution was released, Zionists had already planned to seize all the strategic services and places previously in the British hands: radio and postal services, telecommunications, railways, aerial space, public transports, banks and portions of land. Only in the two years before the UN declaration, they even reached a strengthening of their military capacities, gaining weapons from abroad and setting up a system of conscription for all women and men in Palestine to be enrolled in the Haganah (the second most powerful military force in the Middle East). Even the Jewish Shoah survivors were not spared: already in the refugee camps, they were enlisted to the Zionist army <sup>66</sup>.

As soon as the British troops withdrew and the UN resolution was implemented as a realistic solution, a war exploded in Palestine, which had two important consequences. The first one is the beginning of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, that they remember as the Nakba, the

<sup>65</sup> "Wikipedia, "UNSCOP and UN Ad Hoc Committee partition plans"

<sup>66</sup> Pappè, Ibid, 60

catastrophe. Many villages were completely erased after forcing residents to flee, so nobody could return one day, and 750.000 Palestinians became refugees outside their territories on which the international law guarantees the right of return. The other consequence was the extension of the surface of the Jewish State provided by the resolution, comprising the 78% of the mandatory Palestine <sup>67</sup>. In 1949, the international community convened a commission to address the conflict. However, its most substantial response to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine was merely an armistice with the surrounding Arab states (the administration of Palestinian territories was split: the reign of Jordan formally occupied the West Bank and Gaza came under Egyptian control), and a theoretical demarcation of Israel's borders—borders that would never be respected.



(Fig. 2) <sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> ISPI, Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Granger – Historical Archive, “Refugees in tents during the Nakba”



(Fig. 3)<sup>69</sup>



(Fig. 4)<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Gettyimages, "The Palestinian exodus"

<sup>70</sup> Gettyimages, "A force of Israeli Palmach armoured cars in the Negev Desert"

## 2.4 After 1948: the colonial use of the environment and the territorial occupation of Israel in Palestine

In the previous section I presented how the Zionist ideology and propaganda, and the combined British and Zionists' manipulation of lands and natural resources, brought to the creation of Israeli State and Israeli national identity. This section will briefly comment upon the colonial expansion following the Nakba, that resulted in the today's Israel-Palestine map, which continues to change. The lens of eco-settler colonialism helps us to frame the context and the Israeli strategy of weaponization and instrumentalization of the environment and its resources to accomplish its military interests and occupation goals.

After the 1948, Israel imposed a military regime over Palestinians living within the Jewish State, that permitted random expulsions, arrests of people without trial, opening fire against civilians, sacking their commercial activities – all tactics still in force today in West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. This process of ethnic cleansing, which continues today, is a process that Palestinian themselves call '*al-Nakba al-Mustamirra*', 'the constant catastrophe'<sup>71</sup>. Since 1967, with the Six Days War, Israel has occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem – an occupation marked by violence, human rights violations, annexation of Palestinian lands, and further expansion of settlements: in this very brief conflict the surface of the Jewish State increased of the 300% by occupying even the Syrian Golan Heights and the Egyptian Sinai territory, which will be returned after the Israel-Egypt Camp David agreement of 1978<sup>72</sup>. It was in this period that it started a massive colonization of those claimed Palestinian territories.

After the 1967, the Zionist occupation shifted from the incorporation of the subordinated Palestinian working class into the Israeli social system, to a model of sovereignty, whose first aim is to enclosure and displace the indigenous inhabitants. All of this is possible because of the assumption of a racial hierarchy. This division between the superiors and the inferiors is constantly remarked: from the sky-surveillance control through ever sophisticated drones' technology, to the discriminatory access to social, economic and political goods and opportunities of the colony<sup>73</sup>. The more the colonizers become established, the more the rigor of divisions between the two peoples becomes deeper, so that segregation walls are erected to

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<sup>71</sup> Pappè, *Ibid*, 76 (my translation)

<sup>72</sup> ISPI, *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 65

fragment the territory as it happened in West Bank, and to enclose its population in fragmentary islets<sup>74</sup>. Thus, an intricate system of roads have progressively been established on the occupied territories only for the settlers' use, bypassing Palestinian towns: "these bypass roads not only limit Palestinian access to key transport routes but also disrupt the natural growth and connectivity of Palestinian communities, often creating isolated pockets of land that are difficult to access"<sup>75</sup>. Such infrastructures are a real mechanism of domination that use transportation and urban planning as a tool of annexation, shaping a landscape that serves colonial interests. This is particularly true when this issue conceals the construction of roads serving military infrastructures, which is not only a violation of international law but also a dynamic of spatial and movement control<sup>76</sup>.

The operation of 'snipping the land' through walls and roads constructions does not only physically separate indigenous communities from their territories and restrict their movements, but "prevents Indigenous farmers from agricultural practices that are essential to their livelihoods and an important part of their identity"<sup>77</sup>. Additionally, the separation barriers take up portion of territory and can harm local ecosystems of non-humans that are also indigenous to the land<sup>78</sup>. This translates into a forced impediment of the return for Palestinian refugees, both symbolically and materially, further fragmenting the territory and remarking the separation<sup>79</sup>.

Between 1967 and 1976 Tel Aviv governments created numerous military zones over 26% of the West Bank, which were made inaccessible for Palestinians, even when they had previous rights of property on them<sup>80</sup>. These areas are concentrated especially along the Jordan Valley – a strategy that permits to control water resources and Jordan's borders, further isolating Palestinians from the rest of the Arab world. Speaking of it, Mashaqi et al. described the Palestinian experience as "not just about human suffering or loss, but about a deep, intertwined connection to the land that colonial practices continually undermine", and continued "it is an ecology under siege, where the systematic control of movement, resources, and time aims to disconnect people not only from each other, but from the very environment that shapes their existence"<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Lloyd, "Settler Colonialism and the State of Exception", 70

<sup>75</sup> Mashaqi et al., "Ecology of Erasure", 6

<sup>76</sup> Mashaqi et al., *Ibid*, 7

<sup>77</sup> Hamouda, "Settler Violence and Erasing Indigeneity", 8

<sup>78</sup> Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU), "Israel Environmental Apartheid in Palestine",

<sup>79</sup> G. Sasa, "Oppressive pines", 224

<sup>80</sup> ISPI, *Ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> Mashaqi et al., *Ibid*., 2

Indeed, in settler-colonial context, even environmental policies and management of resources become a medium of domination – ones that operate through the landscapes itself and that can turn ideas as security from one hand, and as conservation or sustainability to the other, into conquest and exclusion <sup>82</sup>.

As can be observed, many conservation projects in the occupied territories have acted as green conduits for processes of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and land grab. A key strategy was and still is afforestation, particularly the planting of European pine forests by the Jewish National Fund. For example, after the occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, Israel decided to fortify the Green Line via tree-planting.

Furthermore, Israeli authorities “fine, arrested or beat up [Palestinians who attempted to tend their lands after they were usurped by green colonies], under the excuse of trespassing and causing damage to [the environment]” <sup>83</sup>.

From 1967 to the end of the 90s, Israel established many natural reserves over about 6% of the West Bank, where Palestinians are stripped of the right to cultivate or build on their land; in contrast, Israel’s Knesset approved residential construction for Jewish colonists inside national parks, giving permits even to pursuit projects and pollute within areas. <sup>84</sup> As Sasa remarks, Israel bluntly does not oppose all human residence within its protected areas, or even environmental degradation, but seeks to erode non-Jewish Palestinian presence only <sup>85</sup>.

This process of ‘flooding occupation’ through strategy of fragmentation, legal escamotages, and military control has never been seriously faced by the international community, so that today about 700.000 settlers have been established in West Bank, where today even civilians are often armed, and around East Jerusalem within 279 outposts that are not allowed from the State, which does not strive to forbid them though <sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> Braverman, “Environmental Justice, Settler Colonialism, and More-Than-Humans”, 12; Hughes et al., *Ibid.*, 3

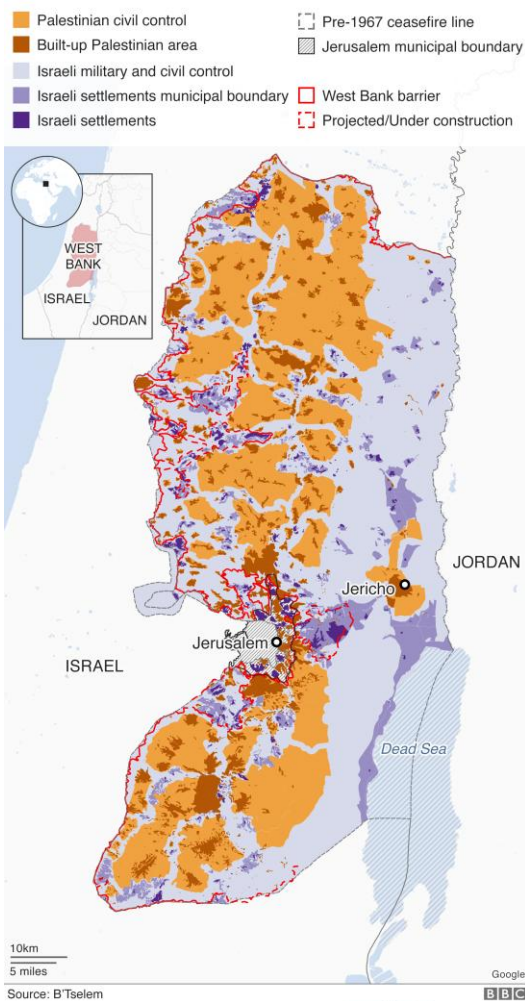
<sup>83</sup> Sasa, *Ibid.*, 224

<sup>84</sup> B’Tselem, “Civil administration uproots 135 Olive trees”

<sup>85</sup> Sasa, *Ibid.*, 224

<sup>86</sup> ISPI, *Ibid.*

## West Bank settlements



(Fig. 5)<sup>87</sup>

Through this management of lives and territory, incidentally, Israel has very often prevented Palestinians from using numerous natural resources—from timber and traditional herbs to arable land and water: all goods that Israeli residents have been making extensive use of, while Palestinians have been often forced to buy them at high prices from the occupying power. This is why the environment can be considered as an extension of battlefield where colonial goals are embodied in policies of segregation and discriminative management of resources.

The case of colonial management of water resources in Israel and Palestine is one of the most glaring cases of weaponization of environment and its outcomes, so that many talk about

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<sup>87</sup> BBC, “Explainer: Israel, annexation and the West Bank”

Israel as an hydro-colony or an hydro-hegemonic entity<sup>88</sup>. In the region there are two transboundary aquifers subjected to contestations over ownership and control: the Mountain Aquifer, extending from north to south through central Israel and the West Bank, and the Coastal Aquifer, beneath Gaza, Israel and the Sinai Peninsula. This is the Gaza Strip's only freshwater. As it has been mentioned in the previous section, groundwater and surface water ways have often been and still are diverted, degraded, or militarized, undermining agriculture, food security, sustainability, and environmental justice.

For example, the project of National Water Carrier, completed by Israel's national water company, Mekorot, in 1964, redirects a substantial portion of water from the Lake of Tiberias at the head of the River Jordan toward the Negev desert within Israel's borders, impeding Palestinians to have access to the Jordan River water basin. Furthermore, "Palestinians struggle to connect the remaining 26% of Palestinian communities to [their] water network, while Israeli settlers receive continuous water supply, largely from groundwater wells in the West Bank"<sup>89</sup>. According to B'Tselem (2011a), this groundwater extraction counted 871 million cubic meters against the 389 allowed by the accords, which depleted the aquifers reserves and limited Palestinian extraction to 91.5 cubic meters in 2008<sup>90</sup>. Those significant modifies and such hyper exploitative actions have resulted in a dramatic cost for the indigenous environment. Firstly, they arose in reduction of the volume of the Jordan River, with a loss of 95% of its flow since the 1950s and contaminations by saline water springs, agricultural chemicals and sewage<sup>91</sup>. Moreover, Zeitoun writes that the waters of the Dead Sea, which should have been supplied by the Jordan River, is experiencing a reduction at a rate of one metre every year, and the groundwater level of the surrounding area has dropped along with it<sup>92</sup>. And this is not all: the area between the highway (on which only the Israeli settlers can drive, while it is forbidden to Palestinians) and the Jordan River has been a closed military zone ever since Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967. Here, beyond the drastic loss of biodiversity of the area, "the bulk of the land – all undergrowth, shrubs, trees and other habitat – is intentionally (and routinely) burned clear to the ground" by the IDF<sup>93</sup>. On the other side, in the Gaza Strip, people have always relied on the Coastal Aquifer for the

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<sup>88</sup> There are numerous scholars, organizations and UN reports that refer to Israel as a power entity carrying out colonial hydro-regime; see Zeitoun, Selby, Gasteyer, Boast and Da'Na just to name a few, and organizations like B'Tselem, Al-Haq, Amnesty International

<sup>89</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 461

<sup>90</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 462

<sup>91</sup> Boast., *Hydrofictions.*, 11

<sup>92</sup> Zeitoun, *Ibid.*, 172

<sup>93</sup> Zeitoun, *Ibid.*, 172

freshwater, but this vital resource has progressively undergone an extreme pressure due to the growing population and overextraction, to the point that today almost no water is drinkable in Gaza<sup>94</sup>. Although both Israelis and Palestinians make use of this water, Gazans have had access to a far lower amount than the Israelis, and after the 2006 it became nearly impossible for them to purchase infrastructural materials to repair or develop water facilities. The last section of this chapter will clarify this specific matter, and the last chapter will delve into it, explaining why Israel have applied a blockade on materials and resources on the Gaza Strip after 2006 and which had been the most important consequences for the population.

Sama Abbas reported that “water governance policies have systematically restricted Palestinian access to freshwater while increasing Israeli consumption, resulting in a two-tiered ecological regime where settlers and indigenous communities experience fundamentally unequal environmental realities”<sup>95</sup>. All of this exemplifies Israeli intentions of creating an economic and social system that perpetuates colonial domination and exploits local resources “to benefit a settler population while marginalizing and disempowering the indigenous Palestinians, turning their own land and resources into mechanisms of subjugation”<sup>96</sup>. In this way the environment becomes an integrated part of the mirror that reflects the inequalities of occupation, and that are, in a sense, ‘naturalized’. As clearly demonstrated by the Israeli actions, the Zionist State is a settler colonial project in fieri, always seeking the more land as possible with less natives as possible to pursue interests that are alien to the indigenous people and the environment of the territory. This situation pushes many scholars and experts to use the term ‘apartheid’ referring to the Israel State. As the United Nations International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid asserts, apartheid pertains “inhuman acts of committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them”<sup>97</sup>. As conveyed by the IMEU report of 2013, numerous international organizations point to dozens of laws that have been passed throughout the decades in Israel, and that favour Israeli citizens and discriminate Palestinians living within the Jewish State<sup>98</sup>. This corpus of laws impacts not only the use and the ownership of land and its resources, but also health, education, family reunification rights of Palestinians.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Noui, Guesbaya, “Water Resource Crisis”, 4

<sup>95</sup> Abbas, *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>96</sup> Mashaqi et al., *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>97</sup> Dugard, “Convention of the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid” (<https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cspca/cspca.html>)

<sup>98</sup> IMEU, “Is Israel an Apartheid State?”

<sup>99</sup> IMEU, *Ibid.*

Indeed, even the International Court of Justice in July 2024 ruled that Israel’s military occupation of Palestinian territories is illegal and constitutes a “systematic discrimination, segregation and apartheid” condition <sup>100</sup>.

## 2.5 Last attempts of peace: the case of Oslo Agreements

Of course, there has been no shortage of resistance attempts by the Palestinian civilian population since the State of Israel was created, ranging from the most peaceful—civil disobedience, demonstrations, and diplomatic efforts—to the more violent, such as armed resistance, that was organized in different groups flown into the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) born the 1964 and still operative today. One of the sparkling examples of civilian riots happened in 1987, when Palestinians residing in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip revolted against the Israel authority: this event was called ‘the first Intifada’ (‘the first shaking off’) <sup>101</sup>. It started when a truck crushed with a civilian’s car: it was initially a non-violent protest movement, thanks to which Palestinians were able to manage some villages basing on self-sustainment and solidarity for a brief period. The IDF, on the contrary, suppressed the uprising following the Defence Minister’s Yitzkah Rabin break-their-bones policy <sup>102</sup>. Despite all, several peace initiatives have been tried, and the last serious attempts were with the Oslo One and Two Accords of 1991-1995, signed between the Israeli’s Prime Minister and the negotiator of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which, after the first agreement, turned into the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), and its leader, Yasser Arafat, became the president. It was the first real direct agreement between Israeli and Palestinians as two equal national and political subjects. Indeed, although it confirmed a ‘break’ into the Palestinian territory, Oslo I established a Palestinian independent self-governance in West Bank and in Gaza. This would have not been granted for free: as Ilan Pappè remembers, “Israelis were ready to renounce to directly control around 40% of the West Bank and that a new organism, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), managed the internal affairs for Palestinians. However, this organism would have accepted to collaborate with the Israeli army and secret services to supervising and repressing any form of resistance

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<sup>100</sup> Maanit et. al., “ICJ Says Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Territories ‘Unlawful’, Must End Presence”

<sup>101</sup> Nasirudeen et al., “Biopower and Necropolitics in the Israel-Palestine Conflict”, 13

<sup>102</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 103 (my translation)

to the occupation”<sup>103</sup>. Nonetheless many points were still missed out: the political status of Jerusalem, the right to return for Palestinians, the dismantle of Israeli colonies, and the definition of the Jewish State’s borders. Additionally, the process of colonization on the Palestinian territories continued even during the negotiations, and it is not all: from 1991, Palestinians that wanted to enter East Jerusalem or Israel have been required of special permissions, which are very difficult to get, and new tools for surveillance were added in the West Bank and throughout the Gaza Strip: the checkpoints. They functioned as physical barriers to basic human rights, that Mashaqi, Zawawi and Ashqar claimed “take more than time; they take lives. Delays at checkpoints have led to the deaths of patients, who were unable to reach medical treatment on time as well as long-term consequences on their health. During the years between 2000 and 2005, at least 68 pregnant Palestinian women gave birth at Israeli checkpoints, leading to 35 miscarriages and the death of five women”<sup>104</sup>. Then, Oslo II was signed in 1995 between Israel and the PNA: Israel would have had to leave 450 villages and six cities in the West Bank, and this had to be divided into three zones: Area A, B, and C<sup>105</sup>. The first one would have been under exclusive Palestinian authority, the second would have had a joint administration, and the last one would have been under Israeli control. This meant a further territorial fragmentation and expansion of Israel de facto. Despite the diplomatic efforts, “Israeli colonial power frequently operates across all areas, enforcing policies that restrict Palestinian movement, control land access, and limit development. The supposed autonomy of Areas A and B thus largely symbolic, as Israel’s control over roads, checkpoints, and permits affects all regions, blurring any meaningful difference among them”<sup>106</sup>. The Oslo Agreements are very important when we talk about the share and management of environmental and natural resources, especially for water as it was the central cornerstone. Indeed, these historical accords have institutionalized a joint system that, practically, concreted the Israeli control over the hydric resources limiting the access to Palestinians. Oslo II created the notorious Joint Water Committee which should have been temporary and encouraged cooperation over water management between Palestinians and Israelis to face the harsh dry temperatures, waiting definitive negotiations that never arrived. The Committee proved only the perpetuation of unequal access that are keeping shrinking Palestinian agency still today. In fact, it envisaged that Israel would have controlled about 80% of the

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<sup>103</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, p. 108, my translation

<sup>104</sup> Mashaqi et al., *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>105</sup> Nasirudeen et al., *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>106</sup> Mashaqi et al., *Ibid.*, 8

groundwaters in the occupied Palestinian territories, while approximately 20% would have been under the Palestinian Authority. According to an analysis published by B'Tselem, 2020, the average daily water consumption per person in Israel was 247. In contrast, the West Bank Palestinians could have access from 26 to 82.4 litres per person each day depending on the areas <sup>107</sup>, while in the Gaza Strip the average consumption was around 82.7 litres in 2023, before October <sup>108</sup>. This despite the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended a minimum of 100 litres per person each day <sup>109</sup>. Shortly, “the per-capita consumption in Israel is 4 to 5 times higher than the Palestinian per-capita consumption in the Palestinian areas” <sup>110</sup>. To cope with water shortages, the Palestinians from both the West Bank and Gaza are forced to purchase water at exorbitant prices from the Israeli Mekorot, which although does not provide enough water for the entire population. Finally, instead of creating favourable conditions for peace, the Oslo Accords fuelled already intense tensions, sparking guerrilla reactions from both sides and collective punishments by the Israeli government against the Palestinian population. Furthermore, the Israeli right was firmly opposed to the Oslo Accords and did not want any concessions to be made to the Palestinians. When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli extremist, the peace process died, and the entire Israeli government spectrum shifted to the right. Indeed, amid tensions and tumultuous within the ever more divided Israeli societies, Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the far-right party Likud, won the election for the first time, but it will not be the last <sup>111</sup>. His government promised to respect the Oslo Agreements, but it actually carried out even more oppressive measures against Palestinians, with the building of new hundreds of checkpoints and violation of human rights on daily basis, whose peak was the massacres and devastation of the Gaza Strip of which we have all been witnessing. In the years that followed the Oslo Agreements there had been other attempts at peace, but none of them was ever truly implemented. Moreover, none of the proposals ever treated the two negotiators as equals: the Palestinian side was consistently placed under political pressure to accept and surrender to Israeli plans. Palestinian demands have been, and still remain, almost entirely ignored by international mediators when it comes to discussing the construction of an effective and lasting peace.

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<sup>107</sup> B'Tselem, “Parched: Israel’s policy of water deprivation in the West Bank”

<sup>108</sup> OXFAM, Water War Crimes, 12

<sup>109</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12

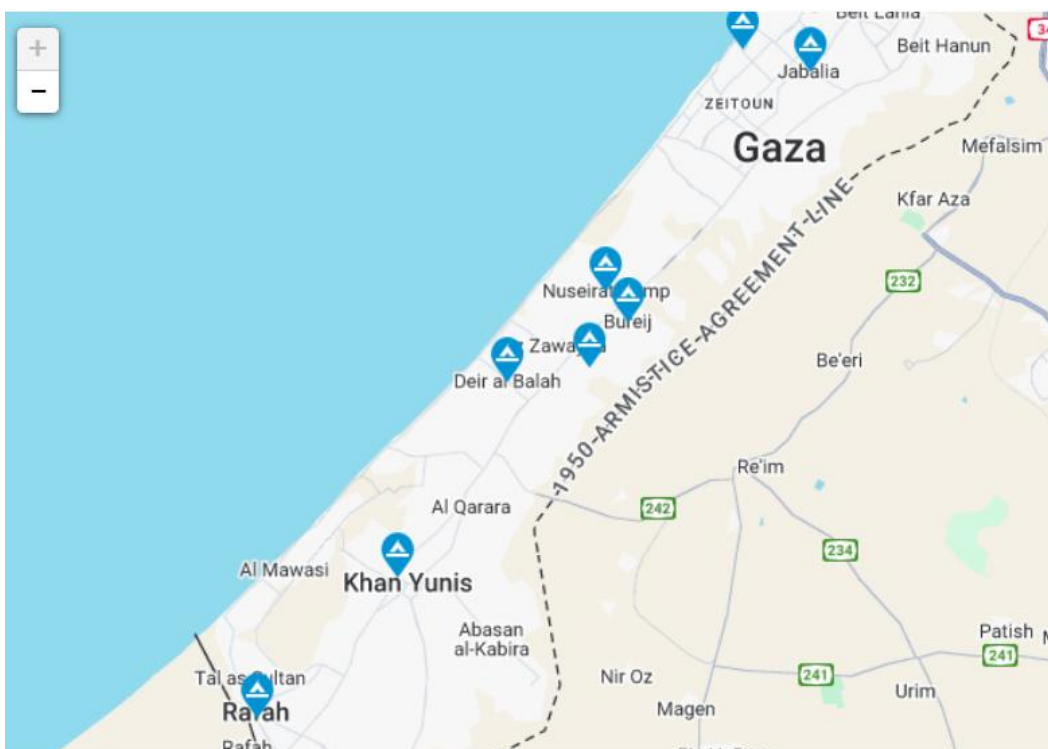
<sup>110</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 461

<sup>111</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 112

## 2.6 Understanding Gaza today

Gaza deserves special attention, both due to its unique place within the Palestinian historical landscape and for the role it plays as a case study in this thesis.

With the Nakba and the creation of the state of Israel, approximately 750,000 Palestinians fled their lands, many of whom found refuge within the Gaza Strip, where as many as eight refugee camps were established, existing until 2023: Al-Maghazi, Jabalia (the largest), Al-Shati (also known as 'Beach Camp'), Khan Yunis, Rafah, Deir al-Balah, Burejj, and Nuseirat.



(Fig.6) <sup>112</sup>

To this day, the UN Relief and Works Agency estimate that refugees in the Strip number around 1.58 million, out of a population that, prior to October 2023, stood at 2.4 million, of whom over 1 million were children <sup>113</sup>. This makes the Gaza Strip one of the most densely populated areas in the world and the largest refugee camp on the planet. For the last 76 years, this land has faced military and administrative occupation, mass killings, arbitrary detentions, and blockades. It is therefore unsurprising that a sense of frustration and a desire of revenge

<sup>112</sup> UNRWA, "The eight refugees camps in the Gaza Strip"

<sup>113</sup> UNRWA, Ibid

are common among Palestinians in the Strip. Indeed, it was in the Gaza Strip and its numerous refugee camps that the Palestinian armed resistance consistently found its strongest foothold. The first acts of rebellion occurred when the refugees from the Nakba attempted to retrieve their livestock and harvests back from the territories undergoing ethnic cleansing during 1948-1949. The next step was forming guerrilla groups, which emerged both in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, but whose activities were particularly intense along the Gaza-Israel borders. For instance, in Gaza, the *fedayeen* (*those who are ready to scarify themselves*) contacted with exiled Palestinians in Egypt, Kuwait, and Lebanon and in 1956 helped found the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, known as *Fatah*, which became one of the most significant military resistance groups in Palestine.

As previously mentioned, in 1949, with the Rhodes Armistice, the Gaza Strip came under Egyptian control, a situation that remained until the fateful Six-Day War of 1967. During this period of colonial expansion, illegal settlements were also built in Gaza, creating what would become Gush Katif, a dense concentration of Jewish settlements. It is fundamental to take this into mind: the people living in the Strip are, for the most part, refugees from the Nakba, squeezed within a tight panhandle by Israel to solve an apparently irresolvable refugee problem. Pappè goes so far as to state that “the Gaza Strip had been an invention of the Israelis in 1948, faced with an apparently insoluble refugee problem”, and despite this, the Israeli governance was able to establish itself there, albeit only for a few thousand people <sup>114</sup>. Indeed, many settlers built two other cities in the occupied Egyptian Sinai, which they had to abandon after the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979.

In 1987, just after the first Intifada, a new resistance armed Palestinian group appeared on the political scene of the Strip: *Hamas*, acronymous for Movement of Islamic Resistance. Born from a branch of the Muslim Brothers founded in Egypt in 1928, this new movement started to gain ground after the killing of four Palestinian workers by an IDF truck in the Jabalia Refugee camp in Gaza during the first Intifada. After the 1967 occupation, Israel looked with favour at the Muslim Brothers, as they thought it could create a fracture within the Palestinian resistance movement Fatah. Contrary to the laic Fatah, Hamas and other Islamist political groups in Palestine constituted the Palestinian opposition to the Oslo agreements and did not adhere to the PNA refusing to operate with the PLO.

According to Israeli leadership, Hamas presence in the Strip gradually turned settlers living there into a liability, as continued attacks and guerrilla warfare prevented Israel from

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<sup>114</sup> Pappè, *Ibid.*, 94 (my translation)

responding with its full force due to the presence of its own civilians on the ground. For, the prime minister Ariel Sharon decided that it was more convenient to leave Gaza and control and attack Hamas from the outside, without risking Israeli civilians' lives.

It was only in 2003 then that the Israeli governance decided to remove settlers from the Strip, after the second Intifada in 2000. Even though Israel used this card to present itself in the international arena as a peacemaker, it was just part of a tactic: it was a matter of time to see a new model of occupation. Indeed, despite the Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, it has been continuing to maintain control over the Strip's border crossings, airspace, and coastal lands. With its withdrawal, Israel left a vacuum of power that was soon filled by Hamas after the election in 2006 replacing the weak PNA and Fatah, while in the West Bank the settler occupation was moving further and the PNA administration was ever more subordinated to the Israeli governance.

The division between Hamas government and the PNA, after the Oslo Accords, further fragmented the national continuity and political cohesion of Palestinians, already geographically divided by the Israeli territory. Such situation had tremendous and different outcomes on the Palestinians, also regarding the shared resources. This is particularly true for the hydric sector, as it entailed a complicated division of rules and responsibilities in water and sanitation delivery. While the agreements set up a supposed framework of shared (even if unequal) control in West Bank, in Gaza they set off a real decommitment by Israel, which aggravated the hydric isolation in the enclave. As a result, the water institutions and sanitation sector became weaker and more divided: in fact, the PWA's performance is poorer in the Gaza Strip than the West Bank, as it "does not go beyond project implementation even though its primary responsibility should be planning regulating and developing sector"<sup>115</sup>. The PNA cannot even transfer water from West Bank to Gaza, despite Israeli illegal use of West Bank's wells for its settlements and for the country itself.

Furthermore, it has never been stipulated any accords or deal for the cooperation and sharing of water of the Coastal Aquifer between Gazans and Israel. Consequently, both the Strip and Israel over-extract from the Coastal Aquifer. This extreme exploitation has significantly depleted and damaged the aquifer. After decades of over-pumping, infiltration of seawater started to contaminate the aquifer, which means that the water flowing from taps in Gaza was and still is very salty and not drinkable. Furthermore, following the Hamas's takeover of the region, Israel imposed a strict blockade on Gaza that significantly restricted access to essential

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<sup>115</sup> Fayed et al., "The political Economy of Water and Sanitation in Gaza", 12

resources and goods, including on machines and equipment necessary for water facilities, medical supplies, and even food. Indeed, Israel controlled what comes in and comes out of the Strip, in terms of people and goods, making extremely difficult for Palestinians to move within and outside their territory, unable to move to the West Bank territories and thus finding themselves ever more isolated <sup>116</sup>.

According to Hassoun, with the blockade “Gaza has experienced severe restrictions on resources, trade, and movement, leading to a profound level of isolation and economic stagnation. This blockade hinders access to global markets, essential supplies, and the ability to rebuild critical infrastructure, all necessary component for sustainable development. Consequently, Gaza remains trapped in a persistent cycle of dependency on external aid and scarce resources, with limited pathways for self-sufficiency and sustainable development” <sup>117</sup>. Israel started to consider many items and certain types of goods as ‘dual-use’ materials, even though these items are not defined as potential military-use-tools by the international standards. With this excuse, Israel listed a series of potentially dangerous items, banning the entry of construction materials, raw materials, chemicals, equipment and other vital items necessary for industry, health care system, and civilian infrastructure.

In 2012, following a legal campaign by Gisha <sup>118</sup>, Israel’s Ministry Defence finally revealed the documents entitled “Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip – Red Lines”, which included information about the restrictions Israel placed on entry of food into Gaza between 2007 and 2010 <sup>119</sup>. This document unveiled that the Israeli government even calculated the quantity of calories the people of Gaza should have reached per day to survive, setting the “humanitarian minimum”, a threshold to which it was possible to reduce food and water without causing malnutrition or hunger <sup>120</sup>. Even if the Red Lines policy is formally no longer in place, the list of dual use, made of vague and broad categories, was surrounded by lack of transparency and it has squeezed everyday life in the Strip. For this reason, many specialists see the Israeli management of the territory and the lives dwelling on it as a ‘slow-motion genocide’, where essential resources are weaponized to the point that Gaza is often described by residents as a ‘large open-air prison’ <sup>121</sup>.

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<sup>116</sup> Fayad et al., *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>117</sup> Hassoun, “Sustainability amid conflict: Gaza’s environmental, social, and economic struggles”, 1

<sup>118</sup> Gisha is an important Israeli not-for-profit organization, which aims to protect freedom of movement of Palestinians, especially in Gaza.

<sup>119</sup> Gisha, “Red Lines, Gray Lists”

<sup>120</sup> Gisha, “Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip- Red Lines”, 4

<sup>121</sup> Hassoun, *Ibid.*, 1

The situation got worse on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, after Hamas launched a huge attack on Israel: this resulted in 1200 Israeli deaths, many of whom civilians, leading to an intense, unprecedented military siege on the Strip. Sticking to an article of the UN Trade and Development, by April 2025 “70% of all structures had been damaged – including factories, homes, hospitals, schools, banks and essential energy, water, telecommunications and agricultural assets”<sup>122</sup>. As one military historian told the Associated Press in December 2023: “Gaza is one of the most intense civilian punishment campaigns in history ... It now sits comfortably in the top quartile of the most devastating bombing campaign ever”<sup>123</sup>. As a matter of fact, the Israeli military has engaged in the massive, indiscriminate bombardment of civilians using some of the most destructive weapons on earth, including bombing areas that Israel designated as ‘safe zones’. In addition to bombs, arrests and devastating siege, Israeli government further restricted humanitarian aid to enter and it has been accused to impede the flowing of essential materials, even diapers and basic medicines, worsening the disastrous impacts on population. There have been even numerous direct attempts from Israeli civilians themselves to block and protest against aid delivery at the Kerem Shalom crossing, Nitzana crossing, and at the Port of Ashdod, and on the roads on which trucks transporting aid travelled. According to the UN, “over 500,000 people – a quarter of Gaza’s population – are facing famine. The rest are suffering from emergency levels of hunger. All 320,000 children under five are at risk of acute malnutrition, with serious lifelong physical and mental health consequences”<sup>124</sup>. In this climax of destruction, human and non-human ecosystems undergo a total turmoil, where the environmental critical issues are essential parts to comprehend the level of the annihilation. As the World Bank Assessment reports, the serious and potentially unreversible damages to the environment hit also the vital services that ecosystem provide to people: massive destruction to housing, roads and infrastructures have negatively impacted the people’s ability to sustain health living conditions in Gaza<sup>125</sup>. Furthermore, “the extensive use of incendiary bombs, including phosphorus, along with other widespread infrastructural destruction have intensified the strain on already limited natural resources in Gaza leading to ecological disaster such as soil erosion, water and air pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity”<sup>126</sup>. The column of debris amount to 41-47 million tonnes so far, which hide

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<sup>122</sup> UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “Gaza’s economy collapsed 83% in 2024, pushing all 2.3 million people into poverty”

<sup>123</sup> Frankel, “Israel’s military campaign in Gaza seen as among the most destructive in history, experts say”

<sup>124</sup> OHCHR, “Gaza: Israel must restore UN humanitarian system to stave off starvation, say UN experts”

<sup>125</sup> World Bank, European Union, UN, “Gaza and West Bank, February 2025”, 50

<sup>126</sup> Hassoun, *Ibid.*, 2

undetonated materials and contaminants from explosive residues, potentially pose long-term risks to soil, water sources, and living beings <sup>127</sup>. All of this brought the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former minister Yoav Gallant for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Gaza, including “crimes of starvation as a method of warfare and [of] intentionally directing an attack against the civilian population; and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts” <sup>128</sup>. As of December 2025, the Ministry of the Health in Gaza reported that 71,266 Palestinians have been killed and 171,222 have been injured, meanwhile around 1,000 more have been murdered in the West Bank <sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> World Bank, European Union, UN, *Ibid.*, 50

<sup>128</sup> International Criminal Court, “Trying individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity”

<sup>129</sup> OCHA, “Humanitarian Situation Update #351” and ILO, Bulletin No.6, “The two-year war in Gaza: Impacts on employment and livelihoods in the West Bank”, 2

### **3. DEATH WATERS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON THE NECROPOLITICAL ADMINISTRATION OF HYDRIC SPACES AND RESOURCES IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

How was it possible for Israel to deprive millions of basic water needs in the Gaza Strip, as we have been seeing during the 2023-ongoing siege? To answer this important question, it is fundamental clarifying that in all the Palestinian territories water is not merely scarce. It is a target. To grasp the full weight of this statement and before delving into the topic, a paradigm shift is required. Namely, to cease viewing water as an object of the conflict and begin to see it as a battlefield itself, an extension of the Palestinian social body that is besieged, mutilated and suffocated. This theoretical and critical chapter outlines the conceptual tools for this act of unveiling.

Upon the colonial foundations I previously showed, a sophisticated apparatus of governance rises. To decipher it, I will turn to the grammar given by the theories of power over life. I will then make clear the concepts of biopower and necropolitics, which allow me to explain the Israeli attempt to discipline and ‘make the colonizing society blooming’, while perpetuating politics that aim to decree indigenous population’s survival below the threshold of dignity and health. More specifically,

I intend to analyse the strategy to control water ways as a fundamental necropolitical tactic for enhancing the authoritarian power of the Zionist state and expanding its borders. I argue that the weaponization of water has enforced separation between Israeli and Palestinians into an unchangeable asymmetrical power structure, that simultaneously weakens Palestinian territories and livelihoods. From the discriminatory allocation of shared aquifers and the restrictive permit systems to the destruction of Palestinian infrastructures and the diversion of resources to settlements, Israeli policies ensure Palestinian water insecurity as a permanent condition. The very fact that the main areas Israel has targeted from the beginning coincide with key Palestinian water-use areas reveals the importance of this vital resource in territorial domination—an aspect too often overlooked in international political studies and colonial scholarship<sup>130</sup>. Finally, the metaphor of the rhizome helps us to visualize a power that does not reside solely in a military command centre, but which branches out into every aspect of

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<sup>130</sup> Messermschmid, “Hydro-Apartheid and Water Access in Israel-Palestine”, 55

the material and spatial management of the colonial reality. Every destroyed water pipeline, every checkpoint, every regulation that denies a repair permit is an integral part of a process of fragmentation and weakening the Palestinian socio-cultural fabric. This chapter serves as a crucial, philosophical reflection that links the preceding historical chapter and the subsequent ethnographic ones. The aim of the following sections is to bring into a critical dialogue the earlier eco-critical analyses of the Zionist project—its discriminatory environmental administration and manipulation—with the findings of the semi-empirical research on the specific instrumentalization of water in acts of extermination carried out in Gaza since October 2023.

### **3.1 ‘Death worlds’: the right to kill Palestinians in the Israeli settler colony**

That the history of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is, in fact, complex and multifaceted is an undeniable historical fact.

However complex, the Palestinian situation is frequently cited by numerous analysts and critics as the most glaring example of contemporary colonial political experimentation <sup>131</sup>. Under the justification of national development, sustainable resource management, or by raising security-related fears, the sovereignty and human rights of Palestinians are systematically violated in the context of the Israeli occupation.

Among them, Achille Mbembe argues that Israel is a model of evolved settler colonialism in technologically advanced nations that self-proclaim to be liberal and democratic. Referring precisely to the condition of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and military control, he analyses the oppressor-oppressed relationship through the concept of necropolitics, which he considers central to understanding colonial control over the sovereignty of land <sup>132</sup>.

With the term necropolitics, Mbembe aims to extend the notion of biopower (or biopolitics) as developed by Foucault <sup>133</sup>. As discussed in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault’s analysis

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<sup>131</sup> An exhaustive list would run too long, but a few prominent examples are Veracini, “The Other Shift”; Lloyd, “Settler Colonialism”; Salamanca et al., “Past is Present”; Pappè, *La Pulizia Etnica della Palestina*; Lloyd, Wolfe, “Settler Colonial Logic”; Pappè, *Brevissima Storia del conflitto tra Israele e Palestina*

<sup>132</sup> Sovereignty is a modern concept entailing manifold meanings that has varied across history. A core definition could be ‘the supreme authority within a territory’, usually through the form of the national state system. An essential element of sovereignty is territoriality, comprised between borders. It constitutes the geographic location where the authority exercises its law on citizens living within the borders. For more in-depth analysis, see Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Sovereignty”

<sup>133</sup> Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 213-214

of biopolitics merges with the problem of governmentality<sup>134</sup>. Here, Foucault claims that the manifestations of contemporary power and authority are characterized by many forms of control and management of human bodies and populations. Every power structure conceives a combination of rules and political dynamics that aim to influence and direct the life of the communities over which it exercises their authority, with the intention of fostering its progress (whether social or economic). In short, biopolitics refers to all the mechanisms by which power structures manage and optimize the biological life of population. This 'power over life and for life' permeates every aspect of individual and collective existence, from the biological, health, and hygienic to the cultural, social, economic, and productive spheres. One of the tools that biopolitics can employ is the capacity to divide the components of the human community into groups, subgroups, and further subdivisions, and to establish a biological—or in any case, intrinsically insurmountable—cleavage between them. Foucault calls this political device 'racism', which is nothing other than one of the potential outcomes of the encounter, and clash, with the 'Other', which has one fundamental implication: "the discourse of race struggle [...] will be recentred and will become the discourse of power itself"<sup>135</sup>. Foucault perceives that the institutionalization of the race discourse transforms political discourse into a battle waged by a race, which proclaims itself as the only true race with the right to define the norm, against those who deviate from that *norma* and thus constitute a threat to society as a whole. When race discourse becomes normalized within the political and social sphere, the State itself constructs its very *raison d'être* upon the constant purification of itself<sup>136</sup>. In the Israeli society this is translated into the construction of racialized categories, exacerbated by the use of governmental technologies to control and manage population with measures like segregation and exclusion. Indeed, it seems that in the Israel society emerges a recognizable pattern in the classification of people living in the territory, one grounded in dehumanizing and racial conceptions. Thus, a distinction is made between Palestinian Israeli citizens, Palestinians living in occupied and subjugated territories, and diasporic Palestinians, but divisions are also made among Palestinian citizens and Jews themselves<sup>137</sup>. For example, more than half of Palestinian Bedouin citizens of Israel live in unrecognized villages', to which the state refuses to provide basic service needs, including water and electricity<sup>138</sup>. These classifications affirm Israel's control over the Palestinians, which is articulated by using

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<sup>134</sup> Wallenstein, "Foucault, Biopolitics, and Governmentality", 12

<sup>135</sup> Foucault, *Ibid.*, p. 83

<sup>136</sup> Foucault, *Ibid.*, p. 83-84

<sup>137</sup> Lentin, "Race and Surveillance in the Settler Colony", 2-3

<sup>138</sup> Lentin, *Ibid.*, 2

security services involving practices of surveillance, curfews, arbitrary arrests, incursions and raids on Palestinian cities and properties, the establishment of checkpoints, and buildings of separation walls. In this sense, racial classifications in Israel/Palestine establish what Foucault describes “a relationship between my life and the death of the other”<sup>139</sup>.

However, Mbembe argues that the perception of the Other as an assault on one’s life, a danger, and an existential threat whose elimination would guarantee and strengthen one’s survival, is an element entrenched in numerous configurations of modern power. Its origins lie in the European colonial imperialism of XIX and the refinement of technical mechanisms for serial killing of both humans and non-humans<sup>140,141</sup>.

This process transformed the act of killing into one that is rapid, depersonalized, and devoid of responsibility—in a certain sense 'cleaner'. The most civil and efficient way of killing the largest number of people in the shortest time possible. When the Other is reduced to a mere shadow of the oppressor, an empty vessel over which dominion is absolute, they are stripped of their character as a 'person.' Consequently, any action aimed at their elimination is never considered morally deplorable. The act, as much as the person, is utterly dehumanized. These dynamics are explicit in colonial or apartheid systems: here, the racist apparatus reaches its peak when it is concatenated to forms of biopower characterized by what can be called a context of state of exception, developed by Giorgio Agamben, an Italian political philosopher of the post-war period. With state of exception Agamben means an *ab legibus* condition, where "the controls and guarantees of the legal order can be suspended and where the violence of the state is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'"<sup>142</sup>.

Giorgio Agamben discussed the ‘state of exception’ claiming that it “is not a special right (like the right of war), but, insofar it suspends the juridical order itself, it defines its threshold or limit-concept”<sup>143</sup>. Such condition of reality permits the physical elimination of adversaries and entire (racialized) categories of people who are somehow deemed unassimilable into the political system<sup>144</sup>. But there is more. The suspension of rights and the consolidation of a grey zone, where every mean that increase a sense of safety is permissible, entrenches the use of violence, whether physical or symbolic, through a state of permanent emergency and fear.

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<sup>139</sup> Foucault, *Ibid.*, 255

<sup>140</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 87

<sup>141</sup> As developed by scholars like Afana (2024), Massive killings of people and genocide crimes can be considered as a continuum with ecocide and massive killings of animals. Although the practices are carried out with different intentions, both are based on normalized dehumanizing, speciesist beliefs

<sup>142</sup> Mbembe, *Ibid.*, 93

<sup>143</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11

<sup>144</sup> Agamben, *Ibid.*, 9

Violence is indeed one of the reactions to fear, and fear is one important ingredient to make people accept a state of exception, to bear an almost unlimited use of authoritarian, military power, and a prolonged suspension of rights. Looking at the case of Israel, to leverage the feeling of fear and terror, one of the Zionist tactics has been relying on the ghost of the Jews' intergenerational trauma: the Shoah, or the Holocaust. As Jean Amery claims, the Shoah epitomized that “solidarity in the face of threat”, a traumatic bond that shaped the Israelis' experience as straightforward survivalism <sup>145</sup>. A widespread desire for greater security compels individuals to respect and protect the violence enacted by the national authority. Furthermore, “The Holocaust [...] has even become an apologia for anti-Arab racism”, justifying expelling Arab Palestinians from their lands, and instrumentalizing discourses against-Israel-policies branded as antisemitic <sup>146</sup>. I argue that this feeling of persecution and paranoia have also contributed to seek in the Palestinian society a 'sacrificial victim', whose elimination would maintain a presumed security, stability and natural order of things. Therefore, as the Palestinians' case explicitly show, the sovereignty of an authoritarian state are manifested not only in its pervasive ability to infiltrate every aspect of individuals' lives through economic exclusivity, the marginalization of certain groups, or by acting upon systems such as public health management and reproductive rights. Its capacity and decision-making also extend beyond the biological life and destinies of individuals, dealing specifically with the control of their death itself <sup>147</sup>. Indeed, the Foucauldian biopolitics and his idea of racism as form of exclusion and segregation do not fully explain how a state can make the elimination of the other-enemy the cornerstone of its ultimate and primary purpose, under the guise of moral objectives such as 'the just war,' 'resistance,' or the 'war on terror' <sup>148</sup>. The concept of necropolitics serves to integrate and to 'complete' the discourse around biopolitics, as it explains that the ultimate demonstration of sovereignty is to actively decide who must live and who must die, who is expendable and who is indispensable, through policies of physical and symbolic elimination of a group. It is thus not merely the right to kill, but also the power to re-narrate and even romanticize acts such as extermination, framing them as a necessary price to pay for a just peace. The articulation of necropolitical power results in the creation of '*death-worlds*,' inhabited by the living dead—that is, individuals torn from the flow of life (*zoè*) and cast into a liminal space

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<sup>145</sup> Amery, *At the Mind's Limits*, 58

<sup>146</sup> Wistrich, “Israel and the Holocaust Trauma”, 18

<sup>147</sup> Mbembe, *Ibid.*, 109

<sup>148</sup> Nasirudeen et al., “Biopower and Necropolitics in the Israel-Palestine Conflict”, 42

where survival is pushed to its absolute limit, to the point of inspiring a desire for death <sup>149</sup>. When we look at the Palestinian situation, it is easy to identify similarities with this manifestation of power. The Israeli colonial entity asserts its sovereignty by virtue of a particular narrative of Jewish history, which is based on a divine right to exist as a mono-ethnic state in a land that, however, was already inhabited by a plurality of linguistic, cultural, and religious presences. Because Israel is a Promised Land and the Jews are its chosen people, any act aimed at making the prophecy true is considered acceptable, even sanctified. And thus, even violence, including its most brutal forms, can become a legitimized, purported divine instrument. When a communal system asserts that the very existence of its people is directly linked to the elimination of another, violence becomes like the oil in the system's gears—a *sine qua non*. It is no longer a device relegated to states of emergency, applied in extra-ordinary events, but an element of daily life. It is here that violence becomes 'democratized,' and its consequences (death, destruction, suffering, and injustice) lose their exceptional character and are normalized. In this context, the exercise of violence is not only legitimate but also encouraged.

For this reason, I argue that the Palestinians' condition showcases several incarnations of Agamben's concept of 'bare life' <sup>150</sup>. The killing of Palestinians and the biopolitical/necropolitical techniques aimed at making their lives impossible entail no legal responsibility for the Israelis who carry them out. Indeed, these acts are incorporated within the state's political order. Considered a hybrid, caught between a 'mere thing in the world' and an acting subject, Palestinians are at times the protagonists of Israeli persecution nightmares—dangerous entities threatening the very survival of the 'State'—while simultaneously being an undefined mass of bodies whose life is reduced to the level of 'zoè', of mere biological existence, even though they are often denied even basic survival. Thereby, Palestinian *homo* is turned into what Agamben calls *homo sacer*, upon whom to direct this violence. According to Agamben, the *homo sacer* condition of existence deliberately reminds the concept of *hostis iudicatio* from the Roman law, which denoted an individual banished from society whom anyone could kill with impunity: “A third institution in which *auctoritas* reveals its specific function of suspending law is the *hostis iudicatio*. In exceptional situations, in which a Roman citizen threatened the security of the republic through conspiracy or treason, he could be declared by the Senato a *hostis*, a public enemy” <sup>151</sup>. The

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<sup>149</sup> Mbembe, *Ibid.*, 109

<sup>150</sup> Agamben, *Ibid.*, 10-11

<sup>151</sup> Agamben, *Ibid.*, 88

*hostis iudicatio* is not only a foreign enemy, for he was radically stripped of any juridical status, and could therefore at any time be deprived of properties and put to death: “What is suspended here by *auctoritas* is not only the juridical order, but the *ius civis*, the very status of the Roman citizen”<sup>152</sup>. In the same way, Palestinian *homo sacer*, whose life is suspended in a limbo between the realms of the dead and the living, is simultaneously inside and outside the Israeli political order. This juridical suspension, which reduces Palestinians to *homo sacer*, finds its most tangible expression in the realm of natural resources management.

### **3.2 Death Waters: the Israeli hydro-hegemony and necropolitics of water**

By positioning itself as the sole *auctoritas* in the territory, Israel does not merely occupy land; rather it assumes exclusive control over the very elements necessary for biological survival – most explicitly water.

Water is a substance that is physically and semantically multiform. We can refer to it as the compound H<sub>2</sub>O, ready to be transformed into a measurable and quantifiable resource by human systems. It can also become an obstacle to pass, or contrary a part of a defensive fortification. Alternatively, we can frame it as the element indispensable for the life and survival of a living body. Or, we can consider it for its poetic and religious value. As Linton asserts, “water is what we make of it”, and “every instance on water that has significance for us is saturated with the ideas, meanings, values, and potentials that we have conferred upon it”<sup>153</sup>. In each of these processes, water is never merely “acted upon by humans but influences human society, producing social relations”<sup>154</sup>. Depending on the use and meaning we attribute to it, water will, in turn, exert a meaning and an impact on our lives. Indeed, “neither water nor society is a pre-existing, independent thing; instead, they are created through their interaction”<sup>155</sup>. Water may appear as a natural element, but it is in fact a product of ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ processes. As they flow, water bodies like rivers, lakes, seas and precipitations are essentially cross-border elements. Precisely because of its relative, polymorphous, and heterogenous identity, water does not care about geopolitical boundaries

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<sup>152</sup> Agamben, *Ibid.*, 88

<sup>153</sup> Linton, *What is water?*, 3, 5

<sup>154</sup> Boast, *Hydrofictions*, 19

<sup>155</sup> Boast, *Ibid.*, 19

or jurisdictions, and for this can create political challenges, competition between economic sectors and fights between communities, both for its use and for its disposal<sup>156</sup>. This is why to regulate human social and political use of water considerable diplomatic efforts are necessary. In this sense, water is a Foucauldian biopolitical tool as its control ensures health and productivity of the population. Water is thus intensely political, inextricably linked to relations of power and authority. At the same time, the 'modern Western gaze' throughout the last two centuries have mostly used standards of hygiene, sanitation, and efficiency to justify state intervention into daily life. By defining 'safe water', the state gains the authority to manage the biological life of the population. Thus, discourses on water-related security or alleged 'inferiority' and 'inefficiency' of traditional practices employed by indigenous communities can justify the colonial intervention and control. This has been often translated into necropolitical policies such as segregated water systems and the realization of infrastructural projects aiming at depriving some groups from water consumption, with the excuse to meliorate the water provision supplies and quality of life (for whom?). For this reason, controlling water courses and water uses is strictly connected to political interests often associated with colonialism, imperialism, land reclamation or contemporary development. Likewise, distribution, management and consumption of water by Israel are not merely technical issues of resources allocation, but rather an instrument of biopolitical and necropolitical governance. If the 'modern', biopolitical management of water through engineering hydraulic projects has meant the flourishing of desert and abundance for the Jewish communities, for Palestinians they became the symbol of their oppression. The dependence created is absolute: Palestinians must negotiate their access to survival through the same sovereign power that has stripped them of juridical status. Just as the *hostis* could be deprived of property and life, the Palestinian population is systematically deprived of basic services and needs such as water. The occupied territories thus become a space where life is not always violently ended by a single act, but could be made impossible through daily, bureaucratic denial of the resources need to sustain it. This regime is not a byproduct of conflict, but a deliberate architecture of control, where hydrological management serves as an instrument of domination and spatial fragmentation as conceived by the Israeli colonial approach to the land and its resources. The politics of space management indeed is highly influenced by the relations of power, which, in the case of the Israel/Palestine case, dictate special conditions for the Palestinians to access to water. This

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<sup>156</sup> Bakker, "Water: Political, biopolitical, material", 1

situation brought the United Nations Development Programme to assert that “so pervasive are the effects of the Israeli occupation on the climate vulnerability of Palestinian communities that the occupation – in and of itself – is considered here a ‘risk’, alongside environmental risks such as sea-level rise and altered rainfall patterns”<sup>157</sup>. There is indeed a crucial nexus between the maintenance of colonial power and the militarization of elements essential for survival, life, and human flourishing at the individual, collective, and social level, as the water is. The strategy to control water ways, thus, configures as a fundamental necropolitical tactic for enhancing the authoritarian power of the Zionist state and expanding its borders.

Mark Zeitoun describes the Israeli control over the water sector as 'hydro-hegemony,' which consists in a combination of three dimensions of power:

- exercise of hard, coercive power;
- softer power, such as that employed in negotiations;
- and ideational power applied in the media and political discourse<sup>158</sup>.

The first type of power refers to the ability to mobilise, for instance, “the capacity of military might or economic strength, or to maintain the machinery of the modes of production”<sup>159</sup>.

Israel benefits of an important international support: indeed, it surely stands as a stronger country than the Palestinian one, and, more generally, as one of the leader powers in the region. For this reason, it can move unilateral actions driven by hard power, as it alone establishes the rules of the game. Hard power comprehends all actions taken to physically destroy or sabotage water infrastructure, including wells and distribution systems. Frequently, in the Israel/Palestine context, this occurs through the military use of force, such as bombardments and shootings. I would also include in this aspect of power the forced deprivation of water as a tactic of retaliation against Palestinian resistance, as witnessed in Gaza during the offensive that began in October 2023. Actually, this is nothing new: the IDF routinely destroys Palestinian water infrastructure both in Gaza and West Bank—such as pipes, networks, reservoirs, cisterns, pumping facilities, wells, spring catchments, and irrigation basins—which it deems illegal<sup>160</sup>. The ubiquity of Israeli action is all-pervasive, arriving from and in all directions. To complete the appropriation of water resources, demolishing buildings and damaging water-related infrastructures become important of the military targets, for hitting them means forcing the resisting Palestinian side to surrender. In

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<sup>157</sup> IMEU, “Israel’s Environmental Apartheid in Palestine”

<sup>158</sup> Zeitoun, *Power and Water in the Middle East*, 26-29

<sup>159</sup> Zeitoun, *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>160</sup> Messermschmid, *Ibid.*, 67

this sense, the Israeli occupation has often manifested itself in its systematic war on Palestinian infrastructure and existence itself, from every possible standpoint. Such military fightings, according to Weizman, are grounded on a particular conception of the space. It is indeed characterized by a stratification of military and political action, encompassing the ground, the subsoil (and all its resources, including water), and the sky. He defines this model as the ‘politics of verticality,’ where the territory is virtually divided and fractured, and where the sovereignty of the Zionist occupation can rely on diverse structures, from underground tunnels to military aircraft <sup>161</sup>. In other words, whereas previous forms of colonialism commonly employed a horizontal approach to territory (the expansion and proliferation of segregation structures literally on the ‘ground’), in the case of Israel, the strategy of space and life organization is three-dimensional—from the sky, through the ground, and down to the subterranean <sup>162</sup>. Weizman explains that this Israeli military actions have been influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘geo-philosophy’, particularly their idea of rhizome. Indeed, several Israeli generals have confirmed that *A Thousand Plateaus*, was common reading among high-ranking IDF officers, and that Deleuzian critique of rigid power inspired their military strategy <sup>163</sup>. They borrowed the term ‘rhizome’ from botany—a root that develops underground, without a centre, and where every point can connect to another <sup>164</sup>. Deleuze and Guattari uses this concept in opposition to the arborescent model (the tree), which is hierarchical, vertical, and centralized. The rhizome, by contrast, is multiform, chaotic, unpredictable, and constantly transforming. Despite the theory’s clearly anarcho-communist intentions, its principles can be unjustly repurposed in a different key. And this is precisely what happens among the seats of political power, military action, and the architectural planning of the Zionist State.

By analysing the IDF operations, particularly in the West Bank, it is evident that the Israeli army puts in place a reorganization of the urban syntax by means of series of micro-tactical actions. Referring to a 2002 IDF operation in Nablus, West Bank, Weizman writes: “During the battle soldiers moved within the city across hundreds of metres of ‘overground tunnels’ carved out through a dense and continuous urban structure. [...] Furthermore, they used none of the city’s streets, roads, alleys or courtyards, or any of the external doors, internal stairwells, and windows, but moves horizontally through walls and vertically through holes

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<sup>161</sup> Weizman, “The Politics of Verticality”

<sup>162</sup> Hall, “Decolonization Coopted: Deleuze in Palestine”, 283

<sup>163</sup> James, “Israeli Deleuzian Forces, Or the ‘theorywashing’ of occupation”

<sup>164</sup> Adkins, “*Deleuze and Guattari’s, A Thousand Plateaus*”, 22

blasted in ceilings and floors”<sup>165</sup>. Such military strategy re-writes the meaning *loci*, re-mentify the urban fabric and gives a brand new hermeneutics of the space: “We interpreted the alley as a place forbidden to walk through and the door as a place forbidden to pass through, and the window as a place forbidden to look through, because a weapon awaits us in the alley, and a booby trap awaits us behind doors. This is because the enemy interprets space in traditional, classical manner, and I do not want to obey this interpretation and fall into his traps”<sup>166</sup>. Thus, even underground aquifers become conflict zones as much as a river and reservoirs. Water courses and resources, the administration of their allocation and the related infrastructures become a prolongment of the war-battlefield.

However, the Israeli hydro-hegemony is not guaranteed only by direct aggressions and attacks on water facilities. The second dimension of power Zeitoun is indeed less visible and overt, as it is exercised through bureaucratic, legal, and negotiated measures. The material force made explicit in the hard use power increases the chance that the stronger part gains more authority and legitimacy in the political arena, so to exert a greater influence on the state of reality. As Zeitoun argues, “faced with no alternative, the weaker side is stuck in a relationship within which demands for change may be suffocated before they are even voiced. The authors note further that if the demands are not directly suffocated, they might otherwise be either kept hidden – at the discretion of the more powerful actor, of course”<sup>167</sup>. The large international support Israel enjoys has helped it to easily avoid, reduce or even deflect any attempts of negotiations, and to re-shape a corpus of law useful to maintain the (favourable) status quo. As a matter of fact, Israel has progressively imposed several military orders to control water resources, such as the Military Order No. 158 of 1967 and the No. 498 of 1974. As mandated by those, it became impermissible for any Palestinian to set up, assemble, possess, or operate a water installation unless a license has been obtained from the area commander<sup>168</sup>.

For instance, in the Area C, which constitutes 60% of the entire West Bank, any kind of new water infrastructure is prohibited—including drilling, connecting neighbourhoods to water grids, and constructing wastewater treatment facilities. In few words, they gave settlers effective veto over Palestinians’ development and the right to demolish any installation built without a permit. Contrary, Israel can export water from within the country and build new infrastructures within the occupied territories to move water to its settlements in the West

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<sup>165</sup> Gelmetti, “Rhizome War, A Deleuzian Analysis of Russo-Ukrainian Conflict”, 3

<sup>166</sup> Gelmetti, *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>167</sup> Zeitoun, *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>168</sup> Gasteyer et al., “Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective”, 461

Bank, while Palestinians are forbidden from transporting water from the West Bank to Gaza and even from one part of the West Bank to another. This is part of the tactic of de-development in which Palestinian development is not just delayed but even reversed <sup>169</sup>. Regarding this, I will come back to the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman's argument about the particular spatial organization of the occupation. Weizman's politics of verticality is not merely an abstract spatial model; Israel operates not only as a war machine, but also as an hydraulic machine. By controlling subsoil, Israel controls primary water sources of the entire region. By controlling the surface, it dictates the routing of pipelines, the location of wells, and the permitting of cisterns. The strategy of rhizomatic fragmentation of space, indeed, not only serves military goals: it leads also architectural projects, environmental policies and management of space and of lives that inhabit it. As a matter of fact, a pivotal Israel's strategy for consolidating its presence in the region and enfeebling Palestinians society has not just been the control and exploitation of water, but also the diversion of transnational hydrological resources, both surface waters and groundwater. Moreover, for the same Order No. 158, Palestinians cannot challenge the unilateral decisions regarding the use and sharing of water from transboundary aquifer areas <sup>170</sup>. This is part of the necropolitical strategy of the Israeli colony for controlling the society, politics and resources of the region. Territorial fragmentation through building division walls, checkpoints, the expansion of settlements, the blockade of goods, aid, and people, and the unequal division of resources like water are necessary to foster an apartheid model <sup>171</sup>. Another case of softer power is given by the Oslo Accords 1990-1995, under which Israeli control over water resources has remained fundamentally unchanged. In the Oslo Interim Agreement, a new form of subterranean sovereignty is mentioned for the first time, which, in effect, erodes the concept of national sovereignty <sup>172</sup>. The Oslo II Accord, indeed, established the Joint Water Committee (JWC), intended as a temporary cooperation mechanism for managing water resources in the region, pending final negotiations, that never really materialized. In practice, the JWC institutionalized rather than resolved the existing inequalities, resulting in a disparity of water allocation and really advantaging the Israeli side. This structural injustice, far from being a temporary measure, became a permanent mechanism for perpetuating Palestinian dependency and shrinking their agency over a vital resource.

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<sup>169</sup> Boast, *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>170</sup> Messermschmid, *Ibid.*, 66

<sup>171</sup> Mbembe, *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>172</sup> Embassy of the State of Palestine, Intern Policy Report (2016), "Water Inequality Under Oslo II"

As Selby states: these water accords of the Oslo II Agreement effectively formalised a supply water management system that had been operating for years, simultaneously presenting it as part of a ‘joint’ and coordinated system <sup>173</sup>. Thus, thanks to an almost exclusive control on water resources and lands, and the use of high technological hydraulic systems – desalination plants, large network of pipes, tunnels, canals and reservoirs, Israeli citizens enjoy a nearly unlimited supply of water for both domestic and public use, as well as for intensive agricultural fields. Such weaponization of water has enforced the separation between Israeli and Palestinians into an unchangeable asymmetrical power structure, that simultaneously weakens Palestinian territories and livelihoods. From the destruction of Palestinian infrastructures through a coercive use of power, to discriminatory allocation of shared aquifers and the restrictive permit systems and diversion of resources to settlements, Israeli policies ensure Palestinian water insecurity as a permanent condition.

The final sphere of power mentioned by Zeitoun, on which Israel rely upon to swell its hydro-hegemonic control, is the ideational power, referring to the manipulation of information and rhetorical, propagandistic narrative. For example, there is a widespread idea that Palestinian and Israeli authorities have established a strong collaborative and collective projects on the base of the already mentioned joint agreement to address regional drought and water scarcity. This discourse is functional to create the idea of the ‘green Israel’ in the faces of the Western civil societies to gain political legitimacy, public support and economic aids from donors, portraying the current water management situation as beneficial to both sides.

However, this myth of cooperation is just a mediatic, bureaucratic coverage. As I displayed just above, the reality faced by Palestinians is marked by a deliberate sabotage to their infrastructures on the base of a legal corpus that justifies and legitimizes water deprivation. Palestinians do not need a cooperative negotiation, as it is only possible when there is a mutual recognition. Rather they need decolonisation of their territories and resources. Beyond the idea of cooperation, even the myth of regional water shortages is ‘politically fabricated’, as it is not an irreconcilable problem caused by the untameable, dry natural context. For example, Ramallah has a higher annual rainfall than London and Jerusalem’s higher than that of Berlin <sup>174</sup>. Our sense of Israel/Palestine as a naturally desertic environment and home of ‘water wars’ is just one narrative that can be told about this place. Such rhetoric is built on an orientalist and environmentally determinist narrative of the Middle East as a

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<sup>173</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 462

<sup>174</sup> Boast, *Ibid.*, 4

land of desert and dangerous Arab dictators that affirms the ‘democratic Israel’ as the only possible entity that can safely and rightly control the water-areas. Different practices, uses, knowledge and management of waters have often been defined as primitive, a narrative that perfectly fits with the widespread ‘Western gaze’ on colonial territories. For this reason, many aquifer landscapes and water systems in occupied colonial territories were considered ‘uncivilized’ and modified or replaced by ‘modern’ constructions <sup>175</sup>. This tendency was exacerbated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely in the period when, according to Bakker, in the Western world and in its colonies the role of water dramatically changed, becoming a marker of civilization and status symbol <sup>176</sup>. As Boast writes, “the most important factor in whether water is constructed as scarce or abundant is dominant forms of political power. Not an unchangeable fact of nature, but a product of political decisions” <sup>177</sup>. It means that experiences of water scarcity are mostly not caused by factual physical conditions of the environment, rather by unequal hydro-political relations of power. This is not to say that the environmental and climatic circumstances are not truthfully difficult, rather to underline that the disproportional provisions of water supply experienced by Israelis and Palestinians are not a natural outcome. The water crises Palestinians must endure are almost entirely man-made, resulting from colonial policies and inequitable sharing of resources. In this sense, the myth of scarcity is nothing more than a way to depoliticize what is actually a political crisis that can only be resolved through the decolonization of both practices and discourse.

The spread of myths and common ideas are engendered by a severe control of information, not only through media, rather influencing directions of scientific research: even in the cases where “it is driven by curiosity, the institutions and funds that make the research possible are not so ‘pure’” <sup>178</sup>. Thus, the entire knowledge structure is not directed towards overturning the status quo, and data challenging the statal view is not likely to be spread or shared.

The results coming from research can be manipulated or overlooked depending on the national and political agenda. For instance, belief of Palestine as a water-scarce land is still almost unquestioned today, but the opposite view prevailed among Zionist leaders before the 1950s: “the Zionist movement used high estimates of Palestine’s water potential to contest the British government’s claims that Palestine lacked the ‘absorptive capacity’ to receive more Jewish immigrants. By claiming abundant supplies of water, Zionist leaders were able to cite

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<sup>175</sup> Bakker, *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>176</sup> Bakker, *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>177</sup> Boast, *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>178</sup> Zeitoun, *Ibid.*, 12

greater areas of land available for cultivation and settlement”<sup>179</sup>. The oscillation between an alleged scarcity and a supposed abundance of water has served settler colonial goals since the founding of the Zionist State. Just like the perception of water scarcity, the perception of abundance and limitless supply has been a politically and rhetorically induced idea that helps to keep alive the myth of the fertile, fruitful promised land, based on the biblical reading of the environment. The shift from abundance to water scarcity is often wrongly seen as the result of enhanced scientific analysis, methods, more advanced equipment, and theories. However, the reality is that this is a political discursive tool helping the centralization of power and control. Indeed, with the creation of the State, the ‘water scarcity thesis’ became more popular: according to Alatout, “it helped to reconfigure water into an element in building a strong, centralized national-state and in constructing the Jewish subject as a citizen. The abundance thesis was a threat to this”<sup>180</sup>.

Either the political discourse has depicted Israel/Palestine territorial context as water scarce or abundant, the ideological aim of the Israeli water resources management and control of narrative about it remained the same: the extension of the Zionist settler dominion on land. This could only be possibly achieved by the exclusion of Palestinians, and, if necessary, by the sabotage or the destruction of their material, social, and economic existence. As Lefebvre frames, those in power often employ tools of exclusion through presumed modernist interventions to ‘improve the land’, ending up ruling it in such a way that some have access to it while others do not<sup>181</sup>. In the context of Palestine, Israel policies and initiatives like withholding water access, destroying water facilities, preventing people from supply water, and reducing its quality and quantity not only constitute a systematic and legally entrenched disparities in water access, but also an unequivocal necropolitical attempt to occupy the land and take control of it. At the same time, the dependence on the occupying power for the water supplies intensify the colonial relationships and constitute a case of environmental apartheid (more specifically, water-apartheid). The restriction of water is a fundamental pillar of the ongoing occupation, calcifying and worsening existing inequalities, stifling development, and exerting a profound, day-to-day impact on Palestinian health, dignity, and the very possibility of viable future.

This discriminatory situation underlines the clear intentions behind the Israel’s political plans and it deploys a weaponization of water use and management to deliberately, slowly carry out

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<sup>179</sup> Boast, *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>180</sup> Alatout, “‘States’ of scarcity: water, space, and identity politics in Israel, 1948-59”, 962

<sup>181</sup> Gasteyer et al., *Ibid.*, 464

ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and occupation of their lands.

Before discussing how, today, Gaza is experiencing the apex of this genocidal policy, I thought it was necessary to explain the categories of thought and philosophical trajectories that have guided my reading of contemporary events. One could speak of Palestine and delineate its history, its symbolic importance for oppressed peoples worldwide, starting from any number of subjects: from agricultural practices of resistance, to attempts to preserve its culture by weaving *tatreez*-embroidered fabrics, to survive the tide of time and resist the occupation's efforts to erase it. Every fibre of its history in the last century has been touched and shaken by British colonialism first, and subsequently by Israeli settler colonialism. I have chosen to narrate it by showing how water has been used as a weapon to realize the dream of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, and, more specifically, through the eyes of those who today, in Gaza, battle between life and death in a purgatory of human nullification, resisting the forced deprivation, contamination, and militarization of basic water resources.



(Fig. 7) <sup>182</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Palestinian women using a water pipe in Masafer Yatta, in the West Bank, May 10, 2022. In +972 Magazine, “In hottest summer ever, Masafer Yatta sears from water apartheid”

## PART II

### 4. METHODS AND ETHICS

The next chapter will unfold my personal research, which employs a semi-ethnographic analytical framework to examine the multifaceted realities of life in Gaza during the ongoing hostilities.

The methodology is therefore an adaptive and responsive one, designed to generate deep, contextual understanding while prioritizing the safety of participants and the integrity of the researcher and the research itself.

With semi-ethnographic research here I mean a qualitative methodological approach that uses principles traditional ethnography – the commitment to rich, contextual, and emic understanding of social realities - within the specific circumstances of Gaza where the immersive fieldwork is unviable. Indeed, the current situation presents the ethical and practical impossibility to conduct a traditional, in-person ethnographic research, due to the context of active siege, bombardment, and humanitarian catastrophe, beyond the impossibility for journalists and foreign observers to go inside the Strip.

For this reason, the analysis cannot present a typical and traditional ethnographic fieldwork research, rather a deep analysis based on a triangulation of diverse data sources. The results is a combined effort of reviewing international and institutional reports, pre-existing academic studies, and material personally collected and elaborated from online meetings with nine people from the Gaza Strip, only three of whom are currently outside. Seven of them personally experienced the Israeli siege from October 7, while two were already living in Italy at the time of the attack, although almost their entire families still live in Gaza.

The “field” is thus conceptualized as a network of narratives and texts rather than a single geographic locale. This approach is particularly relevant and vital for studying sensitive, inaccessible, or high-risk environments, as it is the Gaza war zone.

MEN	WOMEN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hassan (pseudonym): still living in Gaza. He works for the humanitarian initiative WeFeedGaza. I knew him through a friend of mine that put me in contact with the founder of the agency.</li> <li>- Karim (pseudonym): still living in Gaza. He is an dental student and a great friend of mine who I personally contacted.</li> <li>- Khalil (pseudonym): he lived in the North of Gaza until April 2024, now living in Libya. I casually met and talked with him during a university students' assembly for the Palestinian cause, in Ca' Foscari, September 2025. We exchanged our contacts there.</li> <li>- Mohammed (pseudonym): I met him in person through a friend of mine. He works here in Italy where he has been living since 2010.</li> <li>- Qudamah (pseudonym): still living in Gaza. I contacted him through a campaign donation for his family.</li> <li>- Rafiq (pseudonym): still living in Gaza. He was a lawyer before the 7 of October 2023, and a friend of mine who I personally contacted.</li> <li>- Saber (pseudonym): I had his contact from a friend of mine. He is a cultural mediator here in Italy, and work with a manifold of projects and humanitarian initiatives. He has been living in Italy since 2017, where he got a degree in Siena.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Eman: still living in Gaza. I contacted her on Instagram through a friend of mine. She is a student and her passion is writing. She wrote for <i>Al Jazeera</i> and the Italian <i>Internazionale</i> and <i>Il Manifesto</i>, beyond several other blogs and online magazines.</li> <li>- Aisha (pseudonym): still living in Gaza. She is Mohammed's sister. His brother lives in Italy and escaped from the Strip in 2010.</li> </ul>

## **4.1 Methods and challenges in collecting material: a qualitative, triangled approach in a context of siege**

This research intends to be a qualitative, multi-method study, to examine the research question the thesis aims to answer:

how has water been weaponized as a necropolitical and annihilating tool against Palestinian people, during the Israeli 2023-2025 siege on the Gaza Strip? What were the implications on the population's health, and on their daily lives?

To guarantee the solidity of the analysis in such extremely complex context of research, I relied on the syncretism of first-hand observation (in-depth interviews, personal narratives, digital observations, audio-visual documents) and extensive desk-based research of documented sources (academic literature, NGOs reports, verified journalistic accounts).

I opted to base my dissertation on a triangulation use of sources:

- pre-existent academic literature on the topic, useful to provide already known data/information to understand the Gaza-Israel state of affairs, the water quality conditions Gaza has been going through even before the October 2023, and the social and technical implications that characterized distribution, storage, and use of water ;
- international reports and documents from NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and R, journal articles and independent sources useful to provide detailed facts and particulars on the field. The aim is to grasp the unfolding situation that is vexing Gazan territories, with a focus on the implications on the management of water and its use;
- ethnographic written and audible-visible materials collected online through WhatsApp chats, phone callings, and Instagram chats with nine people living/working in Gaza (or that recently escaped from there).

The collected ethnographic data were constantly put in dialogue, confronted and contextualized through the analysis of academic documents, official reports of organizations (NGOs, UN agencies, think tanks) and the pre-existent academic literature. This helped me to better frame and to comprehend the structural dynamics (political, military, humanitarian) that are ongoing in the Gaza context, and to give an historical, theoretical, interpretative horizon to the discussion.

To search and collect the non-ethnographic materials I relied on online sources taken from platforms such as Google, Google Scholar, JStor, and official websites.

Giving the critical context Gaza is undergoing, documenting this reality has been immensely challenging: firstly, because the ethnographic research was carried from a distance and online,

without the opportunity to have physical access to the place of research for participant observation. Furthermore, the struggle to contact people living there and the few organizations operating on the territory in such instable time to collect data and testimonies mirrors the sheer struggle that every Gazans have been facing. Internet was often cut off in the Strip, and people I was in contact with could not have access to it easily. Furthermore, the relentless bombing and unbearable living conditions made the research gait unpredictable and put my 'sources' in situation of constant risk and anxiety, for we could not have relaxed and long conversations. Additionally, there is an important psychological factor: talking about what you are living could be an effort too great, especially if you are living a ferocious siege by an occupying power that could target you and your family at any time for unknown reasons. Due to the physical impossibility of accessing the war zone that constitutes the focus of the research, the interviews were conducted online.

Interactions took the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and, where possible, multiple follow-up conversations, using social media apps such as Whatsapp and Instagram, where they could share videos, pictures, audios, and written testimonies. This allowed me to collect detailed personal testimonies, day-to-day accounts of survival, observations on social solidarity, and reflections on emotional and psychological states.

While this method allowed me to overcome the constraint of distance and ensure safety of the participants and the researcher, it also introduced specific limitations, such as dependence on connectivity, the potential loss of some nonverbal elements that could have emerged in a spontaneous interaction, and the difficulty in grasping the environmental context. To mitigate this, particular attention was paid to building a preliminary relationship of trust and conducting open dialogues. Indeed, my interlocutors were mainly people who I previously strengthened ties with throughout the two years of siege, or with whom I came in contact thanks to friends or people I personally knew who could guarantee for my (good) intentions. Our chat conversations were developed on the base of the interlocutors' answers to some questions I provided for them (see the Appendix), which often brought up different details and simultaneously overlooking or avoiding some aspects of questions.

The language barrier was an additional problem. Given that I am not Arabic speaker, the conversations were carried out in English for most of the time. Only one of my sources spoke only Arabic – for we decided to chat using google translate for both Arabic-to-English (him), and English-to-Arabic (me).

Due to the hybrid nature of the study, this work appears as an explorative-descriptive type of research that does not aim to hide its ethical and practical limits.

Despite that, adhering to the highest ethical standards was paramount, given the vulnerable context of research and the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences. The ethical protocol was built on the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and 'do no harm'. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to each interview. Given the informal communication channels often necessary in conflict zones, consent was sought and confirmed through detailed message in the participants' native language (Arabic), explaining the research aims, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the intended use of the data. This ethical framework was not merely procedural but integral to building the trust necessary for meaningful dialogue in a remote research setting. Throughout the interviews, I exercised maximum sensitivity when approaching potentially traumatic narratives, allowing participants to steer conversations, avoiding pressing for details/videos/pictures.

Recognizing the political importance of bearing witness in this specific context of 'conflict', participants were given the explicit choice regarding their identity. Not to expose them to additional risks, and simultaneously honouring their agencies, I personally chose not to explicit my interlocutors' real names, keeping the anonymity of their identities, and giving them pseudonyms. Only one of my interlocutors is mentioned with her real name, Eman Abu Zayed, as she has been writing numerous articles for Italian journals which she gave me a consent to openly share in this dissertation. As I already mentioned, the documentation that I was able to gather was not exhaustive – an issue that could be contained by integrating the already existed documents and reports disclosing same or relating analysis (independent journalism, international reports, academic studies). This helped to reinforce the evidence emerged from my 'online field research' and to contextualize it. Academic works and independent investigations help to draw up my testimonies' experiences within the broader historical, political, and theoretical frameworks, to trace discourses over time and to compensate for the limited scope of my primary data, due to access constraints. Despite the sample of people that I selected is numerically small (=9), the richness and depth of the testimonies should be considered as significant cases of a collective experience, as it includes people of different genders, coming from different areas of the Gaza Strip and of different ages. The aforementioned limitations, while circumscribing the study's overall scope, simultaneously establish its precise epistemological stance.

It is a qualitative analysis which, via triangulation, seeks to offer a contextual and multi-layered understanding of a phenomenon not directly accessible, an analysis that recognises its

intrinsic character precisely in the partiality of individual viewpoints and the complexity of documentary evidence.

## **4.2 Positionality**

The adoption of a semi-ethnographic methodology within an inaccessible zone of violence not only defines the means of research but profoundly shapes its ethical and epistemological stance. Consequently, a critical and continuous reflection on my positionality is essential to clarify both the possibilities and the inherent limitations of this study. I approach this research not from a presumed neutral or “objective” point of view, but as a scholar explicitly situated – both geographically and intellectually – outside the immediate reality of the siege on Gaza. My primary analytical lens is consciously informed by a decolonial approach and studies on settler colonialism. This is not a hidden bias but a declared analytical commitment through which I filtered all data. It led me to actively seek connections between, for instance, a participant’s account of water scarcity and reports on the destruction of water facilities, framing both within the literature on environmental weaponization. This theoretical framework is not merely an academic tool but an interpretive commitment that recognizes the ongoing situation in Gaza as part of the broader context of settler colonialism in Palestine and as a paradigmatic case of Israeli colonial project. This lens illuminates the intrinsic connections between territorial conquest and the systemic mechanism of land exploitation, environmental degradation, and the weaponization of natural resources like water against an entire people as tools of domination and displacement, severing human and more-than-human relationships and lives. Conscious of the privilege I represent as a Western white student, perspectives, reflections, and intentions behind the following semi-ethnographic research are shaped by the power dynamics inherent in my position. The context of Gaza evokes an incredible and profound sense of powerlessness and shock, which pushes me even harder to present the current situation to the academic audience as a matter to handle with sensitive critique. The intention behind the present research is to defend the dignity of people deprived of means to survive, and stripped of their humanity at Western governments’ eyes. My effort is to talk about how Israel has progressively made extremely difficult accessing water consumption, and how Gazans have struggled to survive these attempts of annihilation, not merely as “knowledge”, rather as a spark and a starting point for deep individual and collective ethical reflections on the meaning and direction of the international order. In this vein, I understand that what counts as valid information carries an ethical burden and an inherent, intrinsic positionality.

To mitigate this, my semi-ethnographic method is a deliberate attempt to decentre my voice as the sole authority, treating personal testimonies from Gaza as con-constitutive data with equal weight to institutional reports. Indeed, I consider their words truthful, reliable and embodied in experiences none can really talk about except them.

The goal is not to speak for, but to create a scholarly space where these voices are brought into conversation with the “academic translation of facts”.

My position, therefore, is one of analytical solidarity, as the research question itself already orients the entire work towards an understanding of interconnected articulation of power, environmental injustice, weaponization of natural resources, and basic human rights. My physical absence from the field means my understanding is perforce mediated and constructed through digital fragments, traumatic testimonies and secondary reports. I have strived to centre the narratives of my Gazan interlocutors, treating their experiences not just as illustrative data but as part of foundational knowledge of the Israeli colonial violence.

However, like every analysis and dissertation, this work cannot escape a form of bias due to the chosen positionality I frame the entire discourse. My bias might have led me to undervalue individual-level data that I found not fitting the pattern, or conversely, to over-interpret a personal story as emblematic of a system and general condition.

In this sense, the triangulation process itself can act as a corrective filter mechanism.

Conversely, the personal narratives prevent the semi-ethnographic research from appearing as mere sterile statistics, differentiating it from an illustrative report on the current condition of induced water scarcity issue.

## 5. THE WAR AGAINST WATER – WEAPONIZATION OF THIRST IN GAZA

This chapter is dedicated to the semi-ethnographic research on the specific case of Gaza and the use, consumption, and management of water in the Strip before and after October 7, 2023. On that day, at 6:30 AM, air raid sirens sounded in Jerusalem, warning citizens of an attack by Hamas. The Palestinian military organization's "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation had, in fact, just begun, with 5,000 rockets fired from the Strip towards Israel. Armed Hamas militants killed and wounded civilians in Israeli kibbutzim bordering the Strip, in southern Israel, taking other citizens hostage and bringing them across the border into Gaza. This event marked the beginning of the Israeli "Iron Swords" operation and a devastating siege, with catastrophic consequences. "I lived through many wars," Qudamah (pseudonym) wrote to me one afternoon, recounting his first experience with the Israeli bombings in 2008, when he was just a boy, up to those in 2021. "But a war like the one in 2023 ... I never dreamed I would live through such a war. I think the term 'war' doesn't do it justice; it should be called something else – genocide, or something like that" <sup>183</sup>.

Living conditions in Gaza deteriorated dramatically and very rapidly after that day due to "an indiscriminate and disproportionate military actions by Israel, amounting to severe violations of international humanitarian law" <sup>184</sup>. According to an Oxfam report from April 2024, 80% of schools were damaged or destroyed, while 227 mosques and 195 cultural sites had been completely obliterated. The same report shows that by July 2024, the entire healthcare system had collapsed, with only 13 of the Strip's 36 hospitals partially functioning. UN experts estimated that approximately 70% of homes in Gaza are today completely or nearly completely destroyed, and over a third of agricultural land, including the irrigation infrastructure system, has been severely damaged <sup>185</sup>.

During a conversation with Saber (pseudonym), who was born and raised in Gaza, and now has been living in Italy for years, he confided to me that he returned to Gaza in 2021, after Israeli bombs took away some relatives and his house. "If you go in Gaza, there's no guarantee to go out. It is a prison", he told me. "It was a bet. I went there, and I could go out. But this time ... in Beith Hanoun there is no school anymore, not a house, any street. Really

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<sup>183</sup> WhatsApp chat with Qudamah, January 27, 2026

<sup>184</sup> OXFAM, "Water War Crimes", 10

<sup>185</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 9

nothing. But when I was a kid I would jump low walls, climb every tree ... All the houses ... I keep the memory in my heart, even if they are not there anymore. This is why I say that human being is the guardian of memory, in the end”<sup>186</sup>.

Since October 13, the Israeli government began issuing numerous evacuation orders.

Approximately 1.9 million people have been forced to leave their homes, causing an enormous internal refugee crisis within the Strip. Many have been forced repeatedly to move to "safe zones" that were, however, often hit by more or less direct attacks from the IDF<sup>187</sup>.

The number of displacements is a detail many of my sources reported, wanting to express the fatigue, exhaustion, and trauma this involved: "Only six times, thank God, and I'm better than others!"<sup>188</sup>. One of my interlocutors told me about his family's itinerary: "My entire family is from Gaza, I'm from Beith Hanoun, bordering 'Israel' to the north and east. They were first displaced to Jabalia, then Gaza City, then Deir Al Balah, then Rafah, then they went back to the centre, and again Gaza City, and now to Deir Al Balah again. Displaced 7 times in 2 years"<sup>189</sup>. These evacuations have exposed civilians to further deprivation and suffering amidst relentless bombing, to the extent that the International Court of Justice has confirmed that the accusations of genocide are plausible<sup>190</sup>. In response to the Hamas attack on October 7, the Israeli government intensified the blockade it had already enforced for 16 years on the Gaza Strip. With it, it imposed a total siege, depriving the population of essential resources such as food, water, electricity, and basic necessities, pushing over 91% of the population to suffer from high levels of acute food insecurity<sup>191</sup>.

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<sup>186</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 12, 2026

<sup>187</sup> World Bank Group et al., "Gaza and West Bank Assessment", 8

<sup>188</sup> WhatsApp chat with Qudamah, January 27, 2026

<sup>189</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 12, 2026

<sup>190</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>191</sup> World Bank Group et al., *Ibid.*, 9



(Fig. 8) <sup>192</sup>

One of my interlocutors, Khalil (pseudonym), who now lives outside Gaza, was the only one that experienced the longest siege of the aggression 2023-2025, in the Northern Governorate, which lasted from October 2024 to January 2025. Here, in addition to relentless destruction, shelling and massive bombardments, the IDF left thousands of people without even the minimum humanitarian access to food, water or any types of healthcare material. This is why all people I talked with described the North of Gaza as worse than the areas where they were living. “People are like this”, Khalil told me showing me his little finger to visually communicate how famine reduced Gazans’ bodies in the north. You can barely recognize each other in Gaza: “I saw the people. They could literally kill each other for a punch of wheat or for ... nothing. People literally lost control, they were like ... zombies. And I was one of

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<sup>192</sup> Frame taken by a WhatsApp video sent by Karim, January 29, 2025

them, I was like this. I saw people fought for very little food. For kids you could do everything, everything in this world, not to let them die or moan for sufferings”<sup>193</sup>.

Karim (pseudonym) writes to me: "At the beginning of this war, the Israeli Minister of Defence came out and declared that water, electricity, food and fuel would be cut off. These things are the essentials for building a dignified life, and when they are cut off and withheld, it transforms into a painful way to stay alive”<sup>194</sup>.

These actions, combined with continuous bombardment, have severely hindered and in some cases disrupted the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide even minimum life-saving emergency services. The Israeli blockade has also affected the supply of fuel and has particularly impacted supplies for the water and sanitation sector. Indeed, Karim continues: "In those days, even obtaining water through the usual means became extremely difficult. The reality was something new for us ...".



(Fig. 9)<sup>195</sup>

But what was the reality Karim talked about that Palestinians in Gaza had to face before October 7, 2023? In the following section, I will outline the pre-existing difficulties before the siege, through what could be defined as a 'silent water siege' within a broader context of 'slow

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<sup>193</sup> Videocall with Khalil, October 4, 2025

<sup>194</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Karim, August 30, 2025

<sup>195</sup> WhatsApp picture sent by Karim, October 12, 2025

motion genocide'<sup>196</sup>. I will analyse what the main supply sources were, and the quality and quantity of water they had access to, considering the Israeli blockade already in effect and the overexploitation of the coastal aquifer. The subsequent section will therefore be dedicated to the disruption of the water system that occurred after October 7, turning what was a humanitarian crisis into a catastrophic situation. Through a comparative analysis of personal testimonies collected with international reports and documentation from independent associations, my goal is to show how hydrating and washing have become survival-level challenges for Gazans. However, my commitment is to shed light on the aspect that, for me, drives the entire thesis and is the reason that gave me the courage to undertake it: the resistance and strength of Gazans that I found in every interview, and in their spirit of resourcefulness and hopeful survival.

## **5.1 Induced Scarcity: the silent hydric siege before October 7, 2023**

### ***Background***

We have already seen that Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories share abundant water resources, such as the Jordan River, the Mountain Aquifer, and the Coastal Aquifer, which, under any circumstances not involving Israeli military occupation, would be governed by international law. However, after 1967 and the Six-Day War, Israel imposed military orders on the use of watercourses in the occupied territories, such as Order 158 and Order 498, which in effect enabled the progressive assimilation of water systems under almost exclusive Israeli control<sup>197</sup>. For Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, this meant requiring a permit from the occupying government to build new facilities, something that happens very rarely. Israeli control then intensified further after 1982, when Palestinian water infrastructure was handed over to the Israeli water company, Mekorot<sup>198</sup>. With the 1990-95 Oslo Accords, the Israeli government secured for itself the use of 87% of the groundwater resources in the West Bank, allowing Palestinians access to only 13%, an amount that has remained unchanged since then<sup>199</sup>.

At the same time, the agreements enshrined complete control over the waters of the Jordan,

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<sup>196</sup> Nijim, "Genocide in Palestine: Gaza as a Case Study", 13

<sup>197</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>198</sup> Al-Haq, "Thirsting for water, 20 years after Oslo"

<sup>199</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 11

albeit under the guise of supposed cooperation with the Palestinian authorities of the West Bank through the Joint Water Committee. For Gaza, however, no joint agreement was established. Occupied from 1967 until 2005, and then subjected to hegemonic control over water, land, and air, and to a blockade on commercial and essential goods, Gaza has suffered significant damage to the Coastal Aquifer, its primary source of water supply. In fact, both the residents of the Strip and Israelis over-extract from the Coastal Aquifer. As Noui and Guesbaya write, “The natural recharge capacity of the aquifer is approximately 55 million cubic meters (Mm<sup>3</sup>) per year [...]. Unfortunately, extraction rate has consistently exceeded this limit”<sup>200</sup>.

In 2023, groundwater extraction reached around 200 Mm<sup>3</sup> per year, nearly four times the recharge capacity. Despite the aquifer being over-exploited by both sides, the distribution of water access was designed, once again, upon the structural inequalities of the colonial system. Palestinians in Gaza were allocated only 25% of the water from the Coastal Aquifer, despite the population having increased 20-fold over the past 65 years, while Israel can utilize 75% of the total<sup>201</sup>. All this has led to a progressive deterioration of the Strip's aquatic ecosystem, causing a 10–20-meter drop in the water table over the past 40 years<sup>202</sup>. This condition leads to an increase in saline water infiltration from the Mediterranean coast, growing by about one-third in the last 20 years. Seawater intrusion and wastewater infiltrating to the aquifer lead to high levels of sodium, nitrate and chloride in the groundwater of the Strip, to the point that in 2017 only one out of nine Palestinian groundwater wells was within the WHO limits in terms of nitrate and one out of five within limits for chloride<sup>203</sup>. Indeed, “seawater intrusion into the aquifer is a major concern in Rafah and North Gaza, leading to some of the worst water quality parameters in the Gaza Strip”<sup>204</sup>. In addition to saltwater infiltration, the Coastal Aquifer was already severely affected by an increase in pollutants and other untreated wastewater before 2023. Every day, sewage seeps into the groundwater and flows into the Mediterranean Sea due to the lack of properly functioning water treatment, resulting in high levels of nitrates and other pollutants into water, particularly dangerous for infants and children<sup>205</sup>. In fact, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on March 22nd, 2023, 97% of the water in the Aquifer in Gaza was polluted<sup>206</sup>.

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<sup>200</sup> Noui, Guesbaya, Water Resource Crisis in the Gaza Strip, 4

<sup>201</sup> Fanack Water, “Gaza’s Water Crisis”

<sup>202</sup> Fanack Water, *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Brugger et al., “Drinking water access and quality in the Gaza Strip”, 2

<sup>204</sup> Brugger et al., *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>205</sup> UN, “Gaza in 2020. A liveable place?”

<sup>206</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12

For this reason, numerous water-borne diseases are prevalent: the WHO and numerous NGOs consider water the most dangerous vector and the greatest risk factor for the spread of disease and epidemics in the Strip”<sup>207</sup>. Khalil told me that, although Gazans were perfectly aware that the Coastal Aquifer was already polluted and highly contaminated, “due to the lack of alternative sources, both residents and municipalities relied on it to meet basic water needs”<sup>208</sup>. The Israeli occupation and the numerous wars and ground incursions that have occurred over the last decades have made it even more difficult for Palestinians in Gaza to obtain water. Even before the 2023 occupation, it was not uncommon for water infrastructure in Gaza to frequently become targets of airstrikes and artillery bombardments, and the numerous Israeli ground incursions have sometimes damaged or destroyed these facilities, blocking supplies necessary for water production and paralyzing the water delivery system<sup>209</sup>. In a report by Gisha, an Israeli non-profit organization, it is explicitly stated that “Israel has damaged civilian infrastructure, including deliberately, during repeated rounds of hostilities in the Strip, thus deterring donors from investing in expensive new infrastructure for fear it would be targeted in the future”<sup>210</sup>.

Saber revealed his personal experience with direct attacks by the IDF. His family had a 100-hectare citrus field in Beith Hanoun: “the youngest tree was 30 years old!”, he repeats, as if to emphasize his family's long-established and deep-rooted presence in northern Gaza. He tells me that in 2005 the occupation destroyed their entire field, and not a single tree remained. This is in line with what has been recorded during the hostilities in 2014, when farmers were forced to leave their land, and during the eruption of violence in 2018, which saw the destruction of over 10,000 dunams (a measure of land area during the Ottoman Empire) of farmland and forests in the Gaza periphery<sup>211</sup>. “But they [Israel] know well that we are capable of re-cultivating, of rebuilding [...] but there is a plan to steal the water [...]. Our response was to realize that we can no longer grow citrus, even though it is close to our hearts ... it requires water with low salinity, low mineral content, and a huge quantity that we no longer have. So we started growing olives, because they resist the type of contaminated water in Gaza, and also its scarcity”. However, “they came to destroy the water wells at our home, which we had for 50 years. To this day, four times”<sup>212</sup>. It is not just direct or collateral

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<sup>207</sup> Messermschmid, “Hydro-Apartheid and Water Access in Israel-Palestine”, 67

<sup>208</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>209</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>210</sup> Gisha, “Hands on the Switch”

<sup>211</sup> EcoPeace Middle East, “Report on the Status of the Hebron-Besor-Wadi Gaza Basin”, 18

<sup>212</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 12, 2026

attacks: the Israeli government, through military orders, has prevented the construction of infrastructural systems that could transport water from the West Bank to Gaza, and, through the blockade in place since 2007, has restricted the entry of materials and equipment for the development and repair of those already present in the Strip<sup>213</sup>. Speaking of the blockade, Saber described the consequences of such restrictions as causing “a continuous crisis”. This creates a huge sense of frustration and anger: “Today we [referring to Israelis’ point of view] do not let pass, tomorrow we do. Maybe for two days and then ... we let them [Palestinians] suffer again. And they do not know for how many days. While they [Israelis] have everything, everything, everything ...”<sup>214</sup>.

Therefore, the civilian population was already facing a water crisis well before October 2023, not only due to poor quality and resulting diseases, but also due to the difficulty in procuring and maintaining collection systems.

### ***Sources and distribution***

From my interviews and the documentation I consulted, I found that there were various sources of water supply and distribution methods before the outbreak of the "war". All the people I conversed with described a complex system of water supply and distribution within the Strip. The chaotic nature of the information I received regarding the methods of water supply and distribution actually demonstrates the difficult reality Gazans were forced to live in to supply water to their homes, even before October 2023. As the study by Brugger et al. states, the situation in Gaza presented "various system of water transport and distribution, making it a formidable challenge to have a clear overview of the drinking water system and its quality"<sup>215</sup>. Indeed, according to official data reported in numerous reports, approximately 80% of the total water supply came from aquifers, pumped to the surface via both private and municipal wells, operating using electric generators. The remaining 20% was purchased from the Israeli company Mekorot, through three pipelines, and from municipal and private desalination plants. The water was then distributed through water networks that reached all the cities in the Strip<sup>216</sup>. According to the Human Rights Watch report, all the water supplied from the aquifers, which amounted to 80%, was unfit for human consumption, and therefore

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<sup>213</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>214</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>215</sup> Brugger et al., *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>216</sup> This information is obtained from the combination of data taken from the OXFAM Report, “Water War Crimes”, 11-13, and Human Rights Watch Report, “Extermination and Acts of Genocide”, 37-40.

only the small portion of water supplied by Mekorot and desalination plants was used for hydration in Gaza <sup>217</sup>.

All the people I spoke with specified that the quality of water they could access daily was divided into "potable" and "non-potable". Regarding the water they considered potable, a complex system consisting of different distribution networks had progressively been created. Rafiq (pseudonym) reports that "Most or nearly all residents of the Strip got drinkable water by purchasing it from trucks that provided it, and they paid money for it" <sup>218</sup>. Tanker trucks in turn used to buy this drinking water from small scale desalination plants that were spread all around the Strip <sup>219</sup>. However, Khalil reports that even today consumers sometimes choose which water is drinkable based on an "aesthetic" value and its taste, preferring water that is "good" and not "salty", even if it is not safe<sup>220</sup>. This is a finding also reported in the study by Brugger et al.: "previous studies reported that water sources choices are driven more by aesthetic concerns, such as smell, taste and high salinity, than by microbiological water quality, even when the participants were aware of the difference in water quality" <sup>221</sup>. Furthermore, among my contacts, it emerged that, again due to the Israeli blockade, it was very difficult to obtain machines and equipment necessary for water treatment and for repairing water deliver facilities, in effect "preventing Gaza from gaining larger share of safe drinking water. As a result, people struggled greatly to obtain sufficient amounts of clean, drinkable water" <sup>222</sup>. Water considered "non-potable", on the other hand, was mainly used for domestic purposes, such as personal and household cleaning, and was supplied mainly by the Gaza municipality and from some public taps called Sabeel, frequently attached to mosques, hospitals or provided by some non-governmental organizations <sup>223</sup>.

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<sup>217</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Extermination and Acts of Genocide", 38

<sup>218</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Rafiq, August 10, 2025

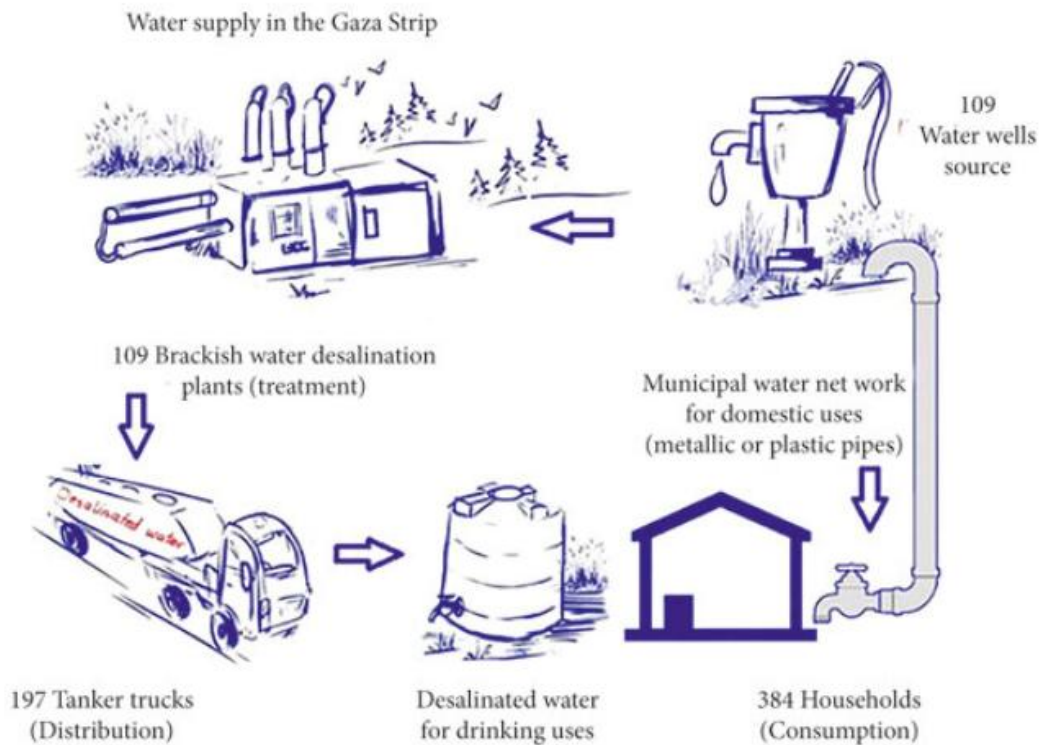
<sup>219</sup> This information is the result of the consultation of the study by Brugger et al., "Drinking water quality and access in the Gaza Strip", 2-3, and similar testimonies reported by all the interlocutors

<sup>220</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>221</sup> Brugger et al., *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>222</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Rafiq, August 10, 2025

<sup>223</sup> This information is the result of the consultation of the study by Brugger et al., "Drinking water quality and access in the Gaza Strip", 2, and similar testimonies reported by all the interlocutors



(Fig. 10)<sup>224</sup>

However, even though the same Human Rights Watch Report, 2024 indicates that Mekorot water was potable, both Khalil and Rafiq recounted that in reality the quantity provided by the occupation was frequently mixed with existing groundwater lowering the overall quality, in contrast with what the Oslo Agreements consider, so they mainly used it for household need<sup>225</sup>. In fact, Khalil claims that the occupation often did not even supply the entire agreed-upon quantity. This information seems to be confirmed by the OXFAM Report, 2024, which states that during drought and water scarcity events, the occupation sometimes shuts off the taps that supply Palestinian communities in Gaza and the West Bank, while Israeli settlements can continue to receive the same quantity<sup>226</sup>. In March 2023, in fact, Israelis, including those living in the West Bank, could rely on 247 litres of water per person per day, while Palestinians in Gaza had only 82.7 litres of water per person per day, slightly more than the 89

<sup>224</sup> Schematic illustration map of a typical Gaza strip's water supply systems in 2020, from Abuzerr et al., "Comprehensive Risk Assessment", 4

<sup>225</sup> This information is a result of the combination of a triangulation of sources: two testimonies released by Khalil and Rafiq, respectively in a written Microsoft Word sent by WhatsApp in September 25, 2025, and in a video sent by WhatsApp in August 10, 2025. You can find similar information in the Anera Report, Before the Taps Run Dry, 3.

<sup>226</sup> OXFAM., Ibid., 13

litres their brothers in the West Bank have access to. In both cases, however, this was already below the minimum quantity of 100 litres per person recommended by the WHO <sup>227</sup>.

### ***“Agat el maya?”***

It is important to remember that the blockade imposed by Israel also affected the supply of electricity, impacting the Palestinians' ability to get water. The Gaza power plant became operational in 2002, but just before October 7, 2023, it began operating at only half its capacity, partly due to numerous Israeli airstrikes in previous clashes <sup>228</sup>. Furthermore, Israeli authorities periodically restricted, sometimes for punitive purposes, the amount of industrial fuel they allowed Palestinians to purchase for the power plant necessary to activate water facilities and desalinators <sup>229</sup>.

"To have water you must have electricity," says Saber, "since 2006 Gaza has been living on 4/6 hours of it per day." Both Rafiq and Saber recount that municipal water for public use reached different areas of Gaza for two to six hours a day, before being cut off and redirected to other neighbourhoods and streets. This is not the same experience of one of my interlocutor, who once lived in Gaza City, who had access to 12 hours of electricity each day, rarely noting that water was cut off from his house. “How did you know when the electricity came?” I once asked Mohammed (pseudonym). He answered me they used to keep the taps outside home open, and they knew that usually water comes at 3 p.m in his area <sup>230</sup>.

According to B’Tselem, an Israeli non-governmental organization, despite 97% of Gaza's population being connected to public water networks in 2014, a constant supply was not guaranteed due to the lack of electricity to operate the pumps and transport the water <sup>231</sup>.

In our conversations, my contacts told me that they collected water in large tanks they kept on the roof. Karim sent me a photo he took at dawn on March 5, 2025, at 5:30 AM. Although the photo dates from the period of the latest aggression that began in 2023, it is useful for getting a clear idea of the water supply system in water tanks that Gazans were already very familiar with.

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<sup>227</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>228</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>229</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>230</sup> Interview with Mohammed, October 20, 2025

<sup>231</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 40



(Fig. 11) <sup>232</sup>

Saber recounts in detail that one tank was used for cold water, and the other for hot water, each with a capacity of about 1000 litres. However, after 2005, they had to add a third one for drinking water, because the water had gotten worse <sup>233</sup>. Both the water supplied by the municipality and the one they purchased had to be transported to the tanks and then pumped from the tanks into the house's pipes, by using electric generators. However, in the case of Mohammed, the small amount of diesel fuel they had available due to the Israeli blockade was not enough to transport the water through the pipes and simultaneously provide electricity to the houses. Therefore, he reports that when there was water, it meant there was no electricity, and when there was electricity, it meant you couldn't use the water. So, they carried the water by hand up to the roofs, up and down the stairs <sup>234</sup>. Whether the water was pumped via electric generators or carried by hand, it is evident that for Gazans, the meaning of water and electricity is strictly interdependent.

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<sup>232</sup> WhatsApp picture sent by Karim, March 5, 2025

<sup>233</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 12, 2026

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Mohammed, January 20, 2025

Electricity is often taken for granted in the wealthy societies of the world, and yet it is an indispensable asset for our reality. In Gaza, the presence or absence of electricity was a source of significant psychological stress even before 2023. Even the youngest absorbed the climate of uncertainty that enveloped and surrounded them: "my children, the first word they learned wasn't 'mom' or 'dad'. It was *kharaba*: *kharaba* means electricity" <sup>235</sup>.

I remember well that Mohammed confided in me that "the life of Palestinians in Gaza is not like that of the rest of the world. No one can live there, no one, only those who were born there" <sup>236</sup>. Coming from a context outside Gaza, one feels disoriented, catapulted into a complex world. The only tools you might perceive as necessary to orient yourself are learning the local words and expressions for primary resources, like water. In this regard, Saber recounts that his uncle had gone to live in Spain, where he married a Spanish woman. In the 90s, he returned to Gaza to visit his family with his wife, who "had learned the word for water, *maya* in Arabic. It was the only word she had learned." The difficulty in obtaining it and its scarcity made water something not to be taken for granted, something awaited with anxiety. Aware that the world his uncle's wife came from, Europe, did not have to worry about the presence or absence of water in their day, they reassured her: "my grandmother always kept an eye out, 'go check, has the water come?', '*aget el maye?*', she would ask, 'so we can use the pump to transport it to the roof'" <sup>237</sup>.

In those few hours when the electricity worked, every Palestinian home in Gaza hurried: "mom had to wash clothes, we had to cook, someone had to charge their phone, watch TV..." and, of course, operate the pump to transport water to the roofs. What caused the most anguish and effort, Saber says, is that you had to be at home when the electricity came, and it was a real daily job.

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<sup>235</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Mohammed, January 20, 2025

<sup>237</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

### ***Stolen water and colonial subordination***

I would like to focus on an aspect I consider very important and that sheds light on the instrumental and weaponized use of water resources to destabilize the lives of Palestinians on multiple fronts: the creation of an economic and material dependence. The imposition of a blockade on essential goods like diesel, or materials (considered dual use by the occupation) indispensable for the maintenance, operation, and development of infrastructure and services, has drastically worsened the lives of Palestinians in Gaza.

The impossibility of self-sufficiency and free management of their own assets has progressively increased the bond of dependence between colonizer and colonized.

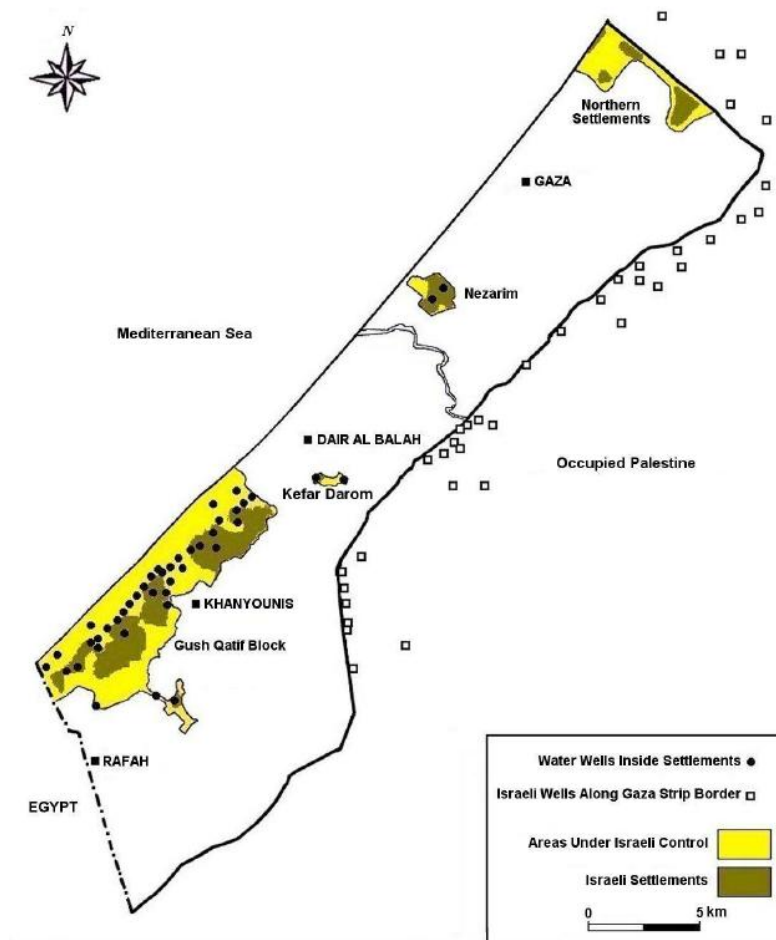
Simultaneously, the unequal distribution of resource consumption and the over-exploitation of these same resources have further aggravated the situation, forcing the Palestinian population to pay the price. Besides the fact that more than half of the water extracted from the Coastal Aquifer is destined for the State of Israel and its settlements, the unsafe water quality, as well as continuous bombings, sabotage, and blockades have pushed Palestinians to subordinate themselves to the water system of the Israeli company, obliging them to depend on the will of the occupation <sup>238</sup>.

Saber (pseudonym) claims that the Israelis built wells on the borders of Gaza to be able to pump water from underground, with the result that "Gaza is always short." As emerges from Al Hallaq's study and the maps it includes, Israel has placed several water wells along the border with the Strip. In fact, before they were dismantled in 2005, the Israeli settlements in the Strip had more than 40 wells pumping the area's best quality water <sup>239</sup>.

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<sup>238</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 12-13

<sup>239</sup> Al Hallaq, "The Israeli Policies", 7



(Fig. 12)<sup>240</sup>

I spoke a lot about this with Saber on the phone: "they destroy what we have in order to take away our sovereignty, in order to 'drive us' (*'indirizzarci'*)". I reflected a lot on the word he used: 'drive', *'indirizzare'*. In fact, destroying the means of sustenance "drives" colonized communities to build an obligatory and forced bond with the colonizer's economic system. He explains that depriving the Palestinian population of water through military assaults on water infrastructure, or through the insidious manipulation of resources, creating induced scarcity in the Strip, is a form of structural violence of Israeli domination. A system of constrictive dependence on the colonial reality is created, a pre-established and planned path for you and against you, and you can do nothing but follow it. "Why do we flee [from our land]? Because we are forced. Whoever is sovereign, self-sufficient, can decide. Whoever has land and resources can say no. We are not sovereign, so we cannot decide for ourselves, because we

<sup>240</sup> This is an old map showing the situation dated back to before Israeli settlements were dismantled and settlers left the Gaza Strip, in 2005. I chose it for it shows the Israeli water-wells along the Gaza Strip border, in line with what my interlocutor reported. You can find it in Al Hallaq, *Ibid.*, 23

lack the means to do so. This is the essence of water: sovereignty, being, existing”<sup>241</sup>. Continuing the conversation, Saber explained to me about his conviction that the Israeli occupation extract water from underground in Israeli lands adjacent to Gaza. According to him, they implemented some water diversion projects that are responsible for the drying up of a river valley present in the Strip, called Wadi Gaza (or Hebron-Besor). This is a hydrographic basin that originates in the West Bank, in the hills of Hebron. The Hebron River flows into Israeli territory, crosses the Negev desert to the north, and traverses Gaza to flow into the Mediterranean. Wadi Gaza is nothing other than the last part, also the most downstream, of the entire hydrographic basin, and constitutes an important natural wetland reserve in the area<sup>242</sup>. However, it suffers from a very high rate of pollution due to inadequate wastewater treatment, so much so that the local flora and fauna are at risk of extinction<sup>243</sup>.

The environmental degradation that Wadi Gaza has suffered in the last two decades is so significant that Palestinians in the Strip describe it as a mostly dry and arid place. Speaking of the Wadi Gaza valley, in an Instagram post from December 2025, Ezzideen Shehab, a doctor residing in Gaza, recalls visiting the place with his school as a child: “We asked the teacher where the water was. [...] She said dams had been built. That the water no longer came. [...] From then on, the valley existed only as a name”. He then describes what presumably happened during the flooding of Gaza in the winter of 2025-2026: “[...] Then the water came. Not gradually, not as rain returns to land, but all at once. The sound arrived first, low and spreading, then undeniable. The dams were opened. The water moved with force and direction. It did not go to fields. It went to what lay lowest, tents, paths, aleeping bodies. [...] The valley [...] received it only when water had become harm”<sup>244</sup>.

Saber told me something very similar, reporting that this was already happening before the ongoing “conflict.” In front of his house, in Beith Hanoun, there is one of the two valleys of Wadi Gaza, while the other is in Gaza City. Until 2000, he could see the valley fill with water during the winter. But then, after dams were built within Israeli borders, this water never returned in the following years. According to Saber's words, the dams had diverted the watercourse that would normally have filled Gaza's valleys, thereby preventing the normal water cycle of the area. Furthermore, “when there is heavy rain, they open these dams. They have done this five, six times. The water comes, it carries away houses, people, land,

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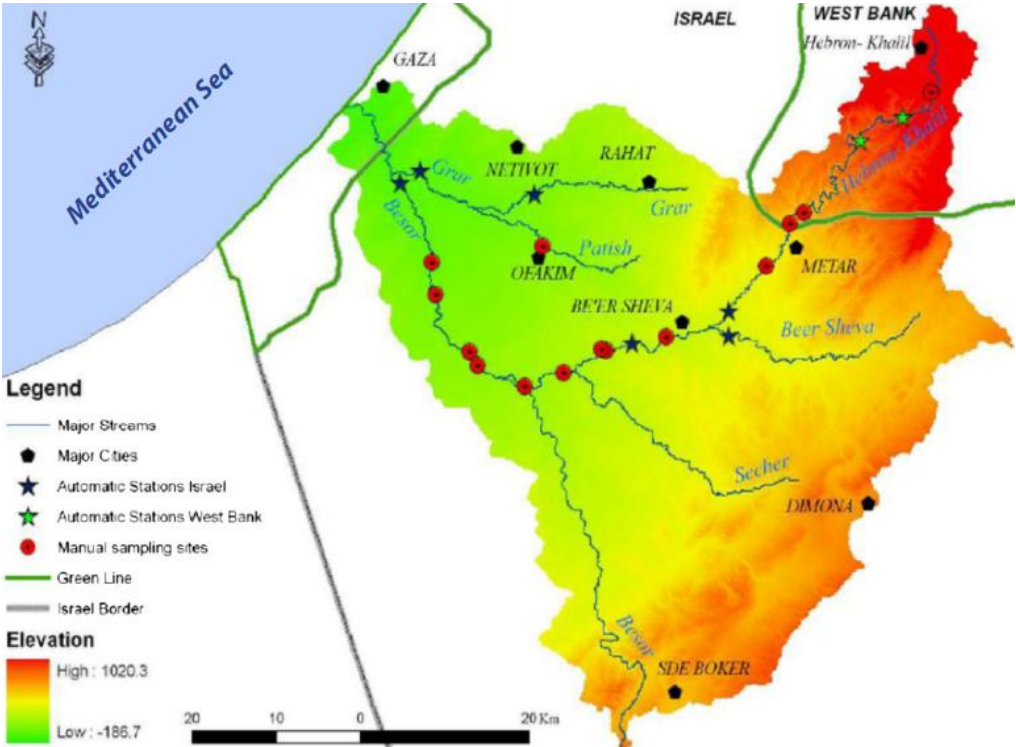
<sup>241</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 12, 2026

<sup>242</sup> EcoPeace Middle East, *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>243</sup> EcoPeace Middle East, *Ibid.*, 21-27

<sup>244</sup> Instagram Post on the Ezzideen Shehab profile, 30/12/25

animals..."<sup>245</sup>. Rafiq also reports that Israel exerts a veritable monopoly over the waters that flow into Wadi Gaza, preventing it “from the natural path that this water was on for thousands of years”<sup>246</sup>.



(Fig. 13)<sup>247</sup>

To tell the truth, the fact that the Israeli government has built dams adjacent to Gaza's territory, deliberately diverting watercourses and opening the dams to intentionally flood the cities of the Strip, is information difficult to find in an organic and explicit manner from official sources, although numerous Palestinians report similar experiences and knowledge. For example, an independent Palestinian non-governmental organization based in the Strip, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, reports similar incidents that occurred in 2020<sup>248</sup>. Similarly, already in Al Hallaq's 2004 study, mention was made of approximately 32 dams, barriers, and reservoirs built along the watercourses that flow into Wadi Gaza to divert them for use within Israel or its settlements, effectively causing its desertification in the Gaza part. On the

<sup>245</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>246</sup> WhatsApp chat with Rafiq, February 2, 2026

<sup>247</sup> Map of the Hebron-Besor-Wadi Gaza Basin, Report on the Status of the Hebron-Besor-Wadi Gaza Basin, 7

<sup>248</sup> Al Mezan Center For Human Rights, “Israel Open Rainwater Dams, Flooding Hundreds of Acres of Farmlands in the Gaza Strip”

contrary, it is mentioned that in the past the aquifer of the Gaza Strip was partially recharged from Wadi Gaza that flows during the winter from Hebron, but Israel stopped its flow <sup>249</sup>. Although numerous reports and academic studies do not clearly mention the presence of alleged Israeli dams that drain Wadi Gaza, it is now an established fact that the state of the Hebron-Besor-Wadi Gaza hydrographic basin is severely compromised by outflow of untreated wastewater and an extremely high level of pollution. The valley has, in fact, been the victim of a significant loss of biodiversity and general degradation. But this, as believed by many Palestinians in Gaza like Saber, is one of the consequences of the Israeli government's political strategies aimed at downgrading the lives of Palestinians, forcing them to witness the ruin of their land and resources, and thus obliging them to "surrender" to the occupation. It is, in fact, a common sentiment in Gaza that every Israeli policy or law managing water infrastructure and distribution "revolves around the possibility of deciding for you, to make you accept that you must be dominated, subjugated" <sup>250</sup>.

## **5.2 All-out war and annihilation: how Israel has weaponized water after October 7, 2023**

If the water reality for Palestinians in Gaza was already complicated before October 7, 2023, after that date it turned into a living hell and a daily struggle.

The Major General Ghassan Alian, the head of the Defence Ministry's Coordinator of the Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), stated: "[...] Hamas as become ISIS [the Islamic State], and the residents of Gaza, instead of being horrified, are celebrating. Human beasts will be dealt with accordingly. Israel has imposed a complete blockade on Gaza. There will be no electricity and no water, just destruction. You wanted hell, you will get hell" <sup>251</sup>.

After the attacks that Hamas launched in southern Israel, senior Israeli officials, along with then-Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, and current Defence Minister Israel Katz, issued an official statement declaring that from that moment onward, Gazans would be deprived of water, electricity, and fuel. On October 9, 2023, Gallant called for a complete siege of the Gaza Strip, while the following day Ben-Gvir posted on his X account: "So far we have transferred 54,000 cubic metres of water and 2,700 megawatts of

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<sup>249</sup> Al Hallaq, *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>250</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>251</sup> COGAT post to X, formerly known as twitter, October 10, 2023

electricity to Gaza per day. Without fuel, even the local electricity will shut down within days and the pumping wells will stop within a week. This is what he will do to a nation of murderers and butchers of children. What was will not be”<sup>252</sup>.

And also, “For years we have provided Gaza with electricity, water, and fuel. Instead of saying thank you, they sent thousands of human animals to butcher, murder, rape and kidnap babies, women and elderly people – so we decided to cut off the supply of water, electricity and fuel, and now their local power plant has collapsed, and there is no electricity in Gaza. We will keep holding a tight siege until the Hamas threat is lifted from Israel and the world”<sup>253</sup>.

These are just a few examples of public statements that strive to show a presumed logical link between the Hamas attacks and the annihilation of all the inhabitants of the Strip, denoting an attempt at self-absolution to justify the collective punishment of Gaza's population. In effect, the reality pursued on the ground by the IDF is nothing other than the practical action advocated in these discourses. In this section, I will analyse the weaponization of water resources as an integral part of the Israeli combat strategy in the siege that began in 2023. Specifically, I will show how the total siege, the destruction of water facilities and infrastructure, the obstruction of humanitarian aid flows, have shattered the existence and daily life of Gazans.

### ***Electricity cut off, fuel obstruction***

From the very first days of the furious siege on the Strip, the Israeli government ordered the blockade of fuel, energy supply from power lines, and water from the Mekorot pipelines:

“During the war, most of these pipelines were either cut off or destroyed, with only partial and occasional supply resuming at times”<sup>254</sup>. In the absence of electricity from power lines, fuel reserves became the only possible alternative to keep power plants, hospitals, and water facilities operational. Although the fuel blockade was partially eased after November 15, 2023, the quantity permitted was still largely insufficient to address the crisis<sup>255</sup>.

Without a fixed, constant, and secure source of electricity, major infrastructure such as wastewater treatment plants, desalination facilities, and hospitals became almost inoperable, and in a short time, Gaza plunged into a near-total blackout. As Eman stated, “water mainly

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<sup>252</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>253</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>254</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>255</sup> This information is a result of a combination of the Human Rights Watch Report, 2024, and the Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, in September 25, 2025

comes from desalination plants or underground wells. But operating these plants and pumping water from the wells requires fuel, and fuel is not allowed into Gaza except in very small amounts that are far from enough for the whole sector”<sup>256</sup>.

Furthermore, the lack of electricity led to a rapid and progressive devastation of refrigeration, irrigation, incubation systems, and other machinery impacting sectors like agriculture and livestock farming, plunging the population into high levels of food insecurity<sup>257</sup>.

The government justified this move by claiming that Hamas diverted aid and used fuel to power rockets against Israel, as well as for fighters' vehicles. In response to these accusations, numerous humanitarian organizations operating on the ground stated that they had found no evidence of aid diversion by Hamas, but rather that in some cases this occurred at the hands of small armed gangs in Gaza<sup>258</sup>. This is a point that Karim also mentions, especially regarding convoys carrying food products: “There are militants who take [the aids] over in areas where no one is supposed to move except the Israeli army “RAFAH”. And then Israel says “we are sending the aid”. The problem [does not come] from us”<sup>259</sup>.

Of course, the scarcity of fuel had turned it into a rarity, and its price was increasing exorbitantly: “Diesel itself costs around 60-70 euros per litre”<sup>260</sup>. The result is an increase in the cost of electricity: Karim writes to me on August 8, 2025, that “in March every watt was 7 shekels, while before the war was 3.7 (approximately one euro)”<sup>261</sup>.

The area hardest hit by the lack of electricity and fuel was northern Gaza: Israeli authorities obstructed and limited access to the point that, for at least the first five weeks of the hostilities, around 95% of missions involving “allocation of fuel and medicines to water reservoirs, water wells and health facilities in the north of Wadi Gaza have been denied access by Israeli authorities”<sup>262</sup>. This meant that no infrastructure for extracting water from the ground, no desalination plant, and no water treatment facility was operational in northern Gaza. An employee at the CMWU stated that they had no idea how people in northern Gaza were living: “some there have their own small wells operating on solar panels, they maybe get one bottle of water from that in a whole day”<sup>263</sup>. Khalil, the only one among my sources who lived in the north during that period, reports that his family had managed to obtain a solar

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<sup>256</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 2025

<sup>257</sup> OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #5”

<sup>258</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 49-50

<sup>259</sup> WhatsApp chat with Karim, November 3, 2024

<sup>260</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>261</sup> WhatsApp chat with Karim, August 8, 2025

<sup>262</sup> OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #124”

<sup>263</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 56

panel. During the spring-summer period, when weather conditions were more favourable, they were able to extract water from the ground by operating a pump. However, the water that was pumped was still not drinkable, contaminated by bacteria and marine pollution, very often also salty in taste, and for this reason, it was never consumed<sup>264</sup>. Adding to the concerns about saltwater in the aquifer, it was reported that the IDF had pumped seawater into the tunnels beneath Gaza, which, according to Israeli intelligence, were used by the Hamas armed forces. Flooding tunnels with seawater could have devastating effects on the aquifer itself and the underground soil of Gaza, with the risk of even making it uninhabitable<sup>265</sup>.



(Fig. 14)<sup>266</sup>

As also reported in the Human Rights Watch 2024 report, before the war there were approximately 300 municipal wells across the Strip that supplied water to the population from the aquifer. Some of these wells had small desalination units alongside them that could filter the water, but according to OCHA, the water these wells produce is "known to be substandard given it is brackish (salty)"<sup>267</sup>.

Precisely regarding this aspect, Khalil argues that since the bombing and siege began and energy resources were blocked, "even accessing underground water has become extremely difficult." However, with no other options, "people are forced to find ways to extract it, despite the fact that it is highly saline and undrinkable"<sup>268</sup>. In April 2024, the WASH Cluster reported that "40 of 300 municipal wells were operational, though this number continues to fluctuate depending on the amount of fuel that is allowed into Gaza, which remains very limited"<sup>269</sup>. I was able to exchange a few messages with Hassan (pseudonym), a humanitarian

<sup>264</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>265</sup> Human Rights Watch, Ibid., 61

<sup>266</sup> A specialist operator busy with fixing the new desalination plant donated by the humanitarian organization, WhatsApp picture sent by Rafiq, August 13, 2025

<sup>267</sup> Human Rights Watch, Ibid., 59

<sup>268</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>269</sup> Human Rights Watch, Ibid., 60

worker who works at We Feed Gaza, an independent, Catholic-inspired movement active on the ground <sup>270</sup>.

He recounts how, thanks to international donations, they managed to acquire some solar panels to power small desalination plants in Khan Younis, in the centre of the Strip. Similarly, Rafiq also told me that, thanks to a \$40,000 donation, the Turkish humanitarian organization Wafa Al-Muhsnin had managed to install solar panels and reactivate a desalinator in the area where he lived at the time of our conversation <sup>271</sup>.

However, this was not enough to meet the minimum needs of the entire population or to compensate for the lack of a continuous, large-scale energy source. As a result, by April 2024, "all water wells in Gaza City have stopped due to running out of fuel," and by June of the same year, critical water infrastructure across the entire Strip was now shut down or operating at an extremely limited capacity <sup>272</sup>.

### ***Deliberate attacks on water facilities***

In addition to the blockade of energy and water supplies, from the very first day of the clashes, military operations in Gaza have focused on the targeted destruction of strategic points vital for the population's survival, such as water and sewage infrastructure, pipelines, desalination plants, sanitation and hygiene facilities (WASH) <sup>273</sup>. OCHA claimed that just after four days from the beginning of the hostilities "seven significant water and sewage facilities [...] were hit by airstrikes and severely damaged" <sup>274</sup>.

While it is not possible to fully verify the cause of all recorded damages, the gathered information seems to confirm that many of the attacks were not incidental, but deliberate and intentional, given that Israeli forces were in control of the areas where the WASH infrastructure was located at the time it was destroyed or damaged. For example, Human Rights Watch reports that the troops themselves posted videos of them "systematically setting and wiring explosives inside a water reservoir" <sup>275</sup>. In July 2023, a video, which went viral on social media, showed combat engineers in the Israeli army preparing and setting explosive charges in Tal Sultan, in one of the Rafah neighbourhoods designated as a 'safe zone,' to

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<sup>270</sup> Instagram chat with Hassan, September 17, 2025

<sup>271</sup> WhatsApp chat with Rafiq, August 13, 2025

<sup>272</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>273</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>274</sup> OCHA, "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #5"

<sup>275</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 63

destroy the main and most important reservoir serving the southern part of the Strip <sup>276</sup>. In addition to this, there are videos and satellite images that have captured scenes of destruction that only advanced military technology attacks, like those of the Israeli army, could have caused, and which would demonstrate that many of these appear intentional.

The evidence includes images of large craters consistent with the use of aerial bombs, the demolition of solar panel fields by bulldozers, and the complete destruction of entire buildings <sup>277</sup>. The main water production infrastructures have suffered extremely high levels of devastation: by July 2024, 71% of desalination plants have been razed to the ground, along with 69% of wells, 66% of water reservoirs, 33% of seawater desalination plants, 70% of pumping stations, and 100% of wastewater treatment infrastructures <sup>278</sup>. To this the destruction of 55% of irrigation systems is added and 78% of greenhouses currently have severe damage, making the population's self-sufficiency even more difficult <sup>279</sup>. Among these greenhouses there are also those that once belonged to the Saber's agricultural project, which he had started before the siege. It was a vertical farming project developed to cope with water scarcity, involving the cultivation of strawberries on multiple stacked layers inside a greenhouse: "We also put solar panels there to be able to water. That was before. Now there is nothing left. It had become a multicultural gathering place; people would come, buy strawberries, and spend time there. [...] This project was my creation. It was beautiful... It was in Beit Lahya" <sup>280</sup>.

The result of this level of destruction has brought the capacity to produce potable water to below 30% as of February 2025 <sup>281</sup>.

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<sup>276</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 81

<sup>277</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>278</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>279</sup> World Bank Group et al., *Ibid.*, 48

<sup>280</sup> Phone correspondence with Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>281</sup> World Bank Group et al., *Ibid.*, 37



(Fig. 15)<sup>282</sup>

Several incidents have also been reported near or inside hospitals involving water and sanitation infrastructure: out of seven attacks, five appear to be direct assaults rather than collateral damage<sup>283</sup>. For example, in November 2023, the Israeli military launched a series of attacks against the oxygen unit, electrical generator, and water lines of the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza, putting the entire hospital out of service.

In another case, in February 2024, the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, while under siege, was subjected to nearby bombardments and the destruction of the sewage system, which led to the flooding of emergency rooms<sup>284</sup>.

Khalil showed me the map of northern Gaza: "We lived five minutes from Al-Shifa Hospital," the hospital that underwent the first major IDF operation in November 2023. Here, around 50,000 displaced people had found shelter at the time. Strikes and other attacks in the vicinity and on the grounds of the hospitals have caused deaths, extensive damage, and destruction, including to the intensive care unit, the cardiology department, some MRI imaging devices, solar panels, oxygen pipelines, and water tanks and wells<sup>285</sup>. These are just examples, yet

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<sup>282</sup> "Photograph [...] shows the solar panel field powering the Central Gaza wastewater treatment plant completely destroyed", Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 71

<sup>283</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>284</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>285</sup> UNHR, "Attacks on hospitals", 5

many other cases have occurred and been recorded in which incidents related to water facilities have caused unavoidable damage to healthcare infrastructure, leading to the collapse of the health system and probable long-term acute risks to public health.

Damage of this magnitude has materialized in a lack of water for wound care and prevention of unsanitary conditions within healthcare facilities, increasing cases of nosocomial

infections, morbidity, mortality, and, naturally, a general state of stress and panic. The consequences of such destruction, combined with the fuel shortage, have meant a dramatic drop in water consumption in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, a decrease of 94% is reported, meaning a drop from approximately 83 litres to 4.74 litres per person per day for drinking, cooking, washing, and cleaning objects and clothes<sup>286</sup>.

The international minimum standard for water consumption, required in acute emergencies, is 15 litres per person per day, which would be equivalent to the amount used to flush a toilet twice<sup>287</sup>.

This means that during the 2023-2025 total siege, the population had to

survive on 6% of the water they had available before October 2023, which was already below WHO standards<sup>289</sup>.

Eman, in fact, writes in an article for the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto* that "In refugee camps and tents, life is no longer measured in hours of sleep, but in litres of water that arrive or do not arrive"<sup>290</sup>.



(Fig. 16)<sup>288</sup>

<sup>286</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>287</sup> Sphere, *The Sphere Handbook*, 106

<sup>288</sup> "Satellite imagery comparison shows the razing of the solar panels powering the Khan Younis wastewater treatment plant.", Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>289</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>290</sup> Eman Abu Zayed, "<<C'è solo acqua salata>>, come le lacrime di Gaza", *Il Manifesto*

### *Sources, distribution, uses*

The daily lives of Gazans have changed drastically. They can no longer even be called "daily lives": each day is an unknown; you don't know if you will be killed or survive, if you will find food or not. There is no space for any routine.

From the accounts and the video-photographic documentation they have sent me, it is possible to infer that there was no real water routine, and there were no precise rules for water distribution and collection. On the contrary, very often there were none at all. In a conversation with Khalil, it emerged that no one in Gaza knew exactly how much water they would manage to get or where: "It depends on the day, and with people constantly moving, there are no fixed distribution points" <sup>291</sup>. The overcrowded conditions in which Palestinians are forced to live, and the continual evacuation orders they are subjected to, have worsened the already significant difficulties in accessing water and increased the risk of disease. As Hassan writes, "some people drink unsafe water, which causes many health problems, especially now due to the large number of displaced people in one area" <sup>292</sup>.

Understanding the multiple challenges Gazans faced every day is almost impossible. From the interviews given by the informants I dealt with and through the conversations we had, it has been complex to clearly sort out the methods of collection and distribution and to fully grasp the extent of the change in their lives. Their accounts reflect the real confusion that must have existed in the Strip during those difficult days. Although their reconstructions were always very lucid and direct, constructing an overall and exhaustive picture is extremely difficult. Therefore, on one hand, I found numerous similarities among the various testimonies; on the other hand, their experiences were marked by some differences depending on the areas they lived in, which characterized their daily reality. When on the phone I asked Khalil, who lived in northern Gaza, to clarify what happened during water distribution moments and if there was some kind of continuity in the collection methods and places to get supplies, he answered: "[...] How can I say ... It's a mess." "So how does it work?" I asked to understand better. At that moment, Khalil tried to imitate: "Oh! There's a [water] truck! Go go go! And everybody runs and rushes, like that" <sup>293</sup>.

It was quite common, in fact, for people to get drinking water from water trucks. The humanitarian ones entered through the Israeli Karem Shalom crossing, but this amount was not enough to meet the needs of the entire Strip, as the aids arrive in limited quantities due to

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<sup>291</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>292</sup> Instagram chat with Hassan, September 17, 2025

<sup>293</sup> Phone correspondence with Khalil, October 4, 2025

the blockade imposed by Israel.

Rafiq states that the occupation "supplies Gaza when it wants and cuts off water whenever it wishes" <sup>294</sup>. Even when trucks managed to enter, widespread distribution was complex: there was a lack of personnel, security problems for humanitarian staff, and due to the destruction of roads and infrastructure, there was no unanimity on distribution points. Therefore, not everyone was able to access them.

For this reason, an inevitable parallel internal market had emerged, based on local materials, personnel, and entrepreneurs.

Many of my contacts reported that, as before the siege, they often bought water from water trucks or water carts coming from within the Strip, which by then could only source from the few remaining functional desalination plants and water wells. "These distribution trucks," humanitarian and non-humanitarian, were "the main source of water" <sup>295</sup>. Khalil explains to me that the little available fuel had to be used not only for transporting water with trucks but also for operating water facilities like pumps and desalination plants: the result was that they had to divert part of the fuel, which could have produced more and cleaner water, for distribution purposes. Hassan also recounts that, through the WeFeedGaza organization where he was working, they would buy water from some still-operating desalination plants, load it onto carts, and transport it for free among the tents of the displaced, even if unfortunately, not everyone benefits. Rafiq, in fact, reports that "people here say that if they can just get enough drinking water to survive in this difficult situation, it is considered good" <sup>296</sup>.

Precisely because the available water was limited and of poor quality, the price to purchase it had increased significantly: "The price is of course very high compared to October 7. [...] People cannot afford it now," writes Khalil. Mineral and drinkable water was not easy to find and was a luxury for most periods of the war.

When the Israelis allowed it to enter, merchants sold it at extremely high prices for Palestinians: a 1.5-liter bottle cost over twenty shekels <sup>297</sup>.

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<sup>294</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Rafiq, August 8, 2025

<sup>295</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 09, 2025

<sup>296</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Rafiq, August 10, 2025

<sup>297</sup> WhatsApp chat with Khalil, his sister's words, February 8, 2026



(Fig. 17) <sup>298</sup>



(Fig. 18) <sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> UNRWA, Report 192, Deir al Balah, by Mohammed Mikkawi, January 11, 2024

<sup>299</sup> People filling containers at water trucks, WhatsApp picture sent by Karim, September 24, 2025

The more months passed, the more the Israeli offensive destroyed the water facilities necessary for the survival of the Palestinian population. Gradually, almost no water treatment structures, like desalination plants, were available. Very often, Gazans had no choice but to drink the little water they could extract from the few remaining and still-functioning water wells. However, "[this] water is neither chlorinated nor guaranteed to be free of contamination, as it originates from underground sources that are polluted and cannot be properly disinfected due to the unavailability of the needed [materials or energy]" <sup>300</sup>. Some people even drink saltwater in extreme cases: "with no other options, people are forced to find ways to extract it, despite the fact that it is highly saline and undrinkable. [...]. People are suffering to secure even small amounts of it, despite its high salinity and high contamination with bacteria [...]" <sup>301</sup>.

The consumption of this water has facilitated the spread of diseases, even fatal ones, and further destabilized the lives of the population, especially among the youngest.

Rafiq explains to me that in his experience, men usually go to the markets to look for food or negotiate materials that could be useful for the family's survival, while women manage domestic life around and inside the tent, along with the children ("children"). In addition, they are responsible for getting water, filling water-jerrycans at distribution points <sup>302</sup>. Eman also states that "the water has to be carried by young people because it's heavy" <sup>303</sup>.

Although the task of filling water containers was often assigned to young people and children, this was not a fixed rule. Hassan, for example, wrote to me that every morning they got up at 6 AM, walked about 2 km, and managed to bring home only 10 litres of water: this amount had to be enough for the entire family to drink, wash, and clean dishes and clothes <sup>304</sup>. Even Eman's father "goes every day to bring water from far away, even though he is 54 years old, but he pushes himself to provide water for the family" <sup>305</sup>.

To collect water, the population usually bought 16-20 litres water jerrycans or gallons, each of which had to be enough for the whole family, but often there wasn't even the possibility to fill them to their total capacity <sup>306</sup>.

Furthermore, families usually could only afford to fill one of these containers due to the high

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<sup>300</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>301</sup> Microsoft Word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>302</sup> WhatsApp chat with Rafiq, October 15, 2025

<sup>303</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 2025

<sup>304</sup> Instagram chat with Hassan, September 17, 2025

<sup>305</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 2025

<sup>306</sup> Information taken by WhatsApp video from Karim in August, 8 2025, and by a Microsoft Word document written by Khalil in September 25, 2025

price of water. Khalil recalls that when they were surrounded by tanks in northern Gaza, they could only obtain a maximum of 34 litres per day for the entire family, and they tried to store it for as many days as possible: "It was like ... washing your face, or getting a shower, was like a dream. The water was just used for drinking, not else"<sup>307</sup>. As Khalil claims, for sure there is no water daily routine among families in Gaza, but people still have some sort of priorities to use it. First of all, for drinking and for praying, as the majority in Gaza is Muslim and needs to do the ablution (*wudu*) before praying. Then respectively for cooking, for shower, for washing clothes and, if there is enough, to clean the surrounded area. Sometimes, several weeks would pass without being able to wash due to the lack of water, which is why some people preferred to wash themselves and their clothes directly in the sea.

The testimonies I have heard and read, and the images sent to me, tell of long lines forming in front of water suppliers or, in the worst cases, crowds of people jostling to scrounge a few litres. It was not uncommon for the Israeli army to target precisely these points where dozens of people gathered: "they bombed women and children while they were standing on the water queue"<sup>308</sup>. As hostilities prolonged, entire neighbourhoods became increasingly difficult to reach safely with water trucks and were progressively cut off from a daily distribution routine. Furthermore, water delivery via trucks became increasingly inconsistent and unpredictable. When he evacuated with his family to Rafah, in the south of the Strip, Karim initially took water for free from municipal water trucks that arrived occasionally, until it was no longer possible to provide this service "due to the bombing of the main water distribution centre for all governorates of the Gaza Strip"<sup>309</sup>.

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<sup>307</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Khalil, October 17, 2025

<sup>308</sup> WhatsApp chat with Rafiq, February 8, 2026

<sup>309</sup> WhatsApp video sent by Karim, August 30, 2025



(Fig. 19)<sup>310</sup>

Therefore, people were frequently forced to walk kilometres to reach supply points, even for non-potable water, like that from water wells, with no guarantee of finding any. Often, they didn't know if the next day they would be able to get more water, or if they would have to wait several days, or if they would have to walk a long time before finding another supply source. Under such difficult and uncertain circumstances, families tried to maintain water reserves as much as possible.

In Karim's case, for example, he had to walk about half an hour early in the morning to reach what he calls 'the water station': "then, I wait in a long queue about 2 hours, just to fill around 50 litres, which is what we can carry walking again back. There is not car, no suitable street for that to go to the station"<sup>311</sup>.

The rampant devastation and the accumulation of debris and rubble make it, even now, more difficult to move within the Strip. As told in the OXFAM report, delivery was also severely hindered by continuing hostilities and extensive destruction of roads and key infrastructure. Routes available to humanitarian actors were and are blocked by debris in every corner of the Strip, heavily congested by overcrowded streets and tents of displaced people and

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<sup>310</sup> Frame of a video showing the municipal water truck delivering water to people in Rafah some days before the Israel invasion, April, 2024, WhatsApp video sent by Karim, August 8, 2025

<sup>311</sup> WhatsApp chat with Karim, March 4, 2025

contaminated with unexploded ordnance<sup>312</sup>. For Gazans, this is a grim daily reality: "Today I was walking around. I found so many bombs and yes, I can move them. It's a normal scene. [...] I kicked it yesterday night by mistake"<sup>313</sup>. It was not unusual for aid workers themselves to be targeted while they were carrying repair materials and water resources to serve the population in need<sup>314</sup>. This happened despite the workers having provided their coordinates to the Israeli army to ensure their protection. As of August 28, 2024, more than 294 aid workers have been killed by the occupation<sup>315</sup>.

### ***Health challenges: devastating impacts***

The harsh conditions imposed by the destruction of water facilities, the reduced availability of fuel, and the impossibility of using filtration systems have not only drastically decreased the level of water supply for Palestinians but have also led to a serious increase in waterborne diseases and general health risks. In this regard, Khalil recounts that, despite most of the Mekorot pipelines being destroyed or functioning only occasionally and partially, the water that came from them tasted better than the water pumped directly from the aquifers without being treated, as the latter had a saltier taste. People, therefore, sometimes drank it, having no alternative, "despite the fact that it is not safe for consumption. Its safety cannot be guaranteed due to the method of transportation and lack of proper treatment"<sup>316</sup>. Sometimes, people boiled it, but "those living in tents and shelters without adequate fuel could no reliably boil their water"<sup>317</sup>. Amid lack of fuel and gas, even lighting a fire to cook was extremely difficult. In this regard, Khalil remembers that, during the evacuation orders, he saw people even carrying away the doors from their homes, "because they could be useful to light the fire or for any types of use"<sup>318</sup>.

Among my interlocutors, it frequently happened that they fell ill, sometimes seriously, during the months we were in contact. They often told me about having intestinal or respiratory problems. Indeed, precisely the inability to wash regularly contributed to the spread of over 1 million cases of acute respiratory infection, in addition to 225,000 cases of skin diseases by October 2024<sup>319</sup>.

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<sup>312</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 30

<sup>313</sup> Microsoft Word document by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>314</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 80

<sup>315</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 88

<sup>316</sup> Microsoft Word document by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>317</sup> Cole, *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>318</sup> Phone correspondence, Khalil, October 4, 2025

<sup>319</sup> WHO, "A Year of Crisis"

One of them, Khalil, reports having been in the hospital for Hepatitis A, as were his nieces, aged eleven and nine <sup>320</sup>. His sister reports that the entire family later suffered from vomiting and persistent diarrhoea: "even our small kitten did not escape illness due to contaminated water, which later turned out to be untreated and unfiltered, and not suitable for drinking" <sup>321</sup>.

The same happened to a relative of another one of my interlocutors, diagnosed with Hepatitis A. Indeed, untreated and contaminated water can contain fungi, bacteria, viruses, and pathogens that can cause cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, Hepatitis A, typhoid, and many other diseases <sup>322</sup>.

Furthermore, high levels of dehydration increase the risk of organ failure and weaken the immune system, making the population more susceptible to contracting diseases and/or prolonging convalescence periods.

Exposure to sewage water was and is a determining factor in the increase of diarrhoea cases, especially among the youngest. UNICEF writes that "cases of diarrhoea in children under five years of age rose from 48,000 to 71,000

in just one week, starting December 17," representing an increase of 2,000 (Fig.20) <sup>323</sup> from the average rate prior to October 7, 2023 <sup>324</sup>. Severe cases of kidney failure are also reported. According to Gaza's health authorities, the suspension of dialysis treatments has had an extraordinarily high mortality rate: over 41% of patients.

The cause is the lethal combination of lack of electricity, water scarcity, and the destruction of healthcare facilities <sup>325</sup>. In *Il Manifesto*, Eman recounts the words spoken to her by a woman sitting outside her tent next to empty plastic tanks surrounded by flies, in the Nuseirat area: "For some time now, I've been feeling pain on my right side, around the kidney, especially when I drink water from the tank. The water is salty and sometimes has a strange smell, but we have no other choice" <sup>326</sup>. Women in particular report facing enormous difficulties,



<sup>320</sup> WhatsApp chat with Khalil, his sister's words, February 8, 2026

<sup>321</sup> WhatsApp chat with Khalil, his sister's words, February 8, 2026

<sup>322</sup> OXFAM, *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>323</sup> Children carrying water in a bucket, WhatsApp picture sent by Eman, September 15, 2025

<sup>324</sup> UNICEF, "Intensifying conflict, malnutrition and disease"

<sup>325</sup> Palestine Centre of Human Rights, "Kidney Failure", 11

<sup>326</sup> Eman Abu Zayed, *Ibid.*, *Il Manifesto*

especially regarding hygiene: "the first difficulty that we face is to keep ourselves clean. [...] It is so, so hard for us," Aisha (pseudonym) tells me <sup>327</sup>. Often, overcrowded shelters exacerbate these conditions, sometimes pushing women to reduce their water intake to avoid using the bathroom <sup>328</sup>. In fact, according to Médecins Sans Frontières, by February, there was just one toilet for every 500 individuals <sup>329</sup>.

Eman, in a WhatsApp chat, recounts that the biggest difficulty women and children face is precisely "the great effort and exhaustion involved in fetching water, especially from distant areas" <sup>330</sup>. Hassan also states that "women face many challenges, including the inability to maintain personal hygiene, the spread of some skin diseases, the fatigue of carrying water, the violation of privacy, drinking unsafe water, and walking long distances to obtain water" <sup>331</sup>. Furthermore, since women in families are often responsible for cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and maintaining their family's health, the difficulty in performing these tasks causes them a lot of stress <sup>332</sup>. The average family size is indeed 6 members, and this often requires securing 45-60 litres per day on average: "Of course it depends on the security situation and how it is harmful in the area as for they can go and pick water," explains Khalil <sup>333</sup>.

The psychological stress related to water insecurity and availability can contribute to further increasing risks for pregnant women, as it can adversely affect pregnancy outcomes, including increased rates of preterm births and lower birth weights. Moreover, "maternal mental health issues can hinder maternal-infant bonding, affecting breastfeeding practices and early childhood development" <sup>334</sup>. Very often, women who have just given birth or have small children cannot breastfeed due to malnutrition and dehydration, forced to feed them infant formula mixed with dirty water <sup>335</sup>. Conditions are so dire that mothers had to rely on undrinkable water, as Eman reported with words that a woman confided in her: "When my children cry from thirst, I give them salty water and pray for God's mercy. What else can I do?" <sup>336</sup>.

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<sup>327</sup> WhatsApp audio by Aisha, October 24, 2025

<sup>328</sup> Farajallah, "Challenges in access to safe drinking water", 54

<sup>329</sup> Cole, "Weaponizing a Water Crisis", *New Lines Institute*

<sup>330</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 2025

<sup>331</sup> Instagram chat with Hassan, September 17, 2025

<sup>332</sup> WhatsApp chat with Eman, September 19, 2025

<sup>333</sup> Microsoft word document written by Khalil, sent by WhatsApp, September 25, 2025

<sup>334</sup> Farajallah, *Ibid.*, 57

<sup>335</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>336</sup> Eman Abu Zayed, *Ibid.*, *Il Manifesto*



(Fig. 21)<sup>337</sup>



(Fig. 22)<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Women washing utensils outside her tent, using water that comes from water tank donated by humanitarian organizations, WhatsApp picture sent by Saber, January 13, 2026

<sup>338</sup> Girl carrying water jerrycans, picture sent by Hassan, September 17, 2025

## 6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION:

The first time I heard about Palestine was very late in my life. I was around twenty years old, and although it touched the chords of my sensitivity and curiosity from the very beginning, it was only after October 7, 2023, that I felt a spontaneous urge to immerse myself in this immense journey that is the Palestinian cause. The first videos on social networks, the first images and testimonies, devastated me.

Given my previous studies in Philosophy and the Environmental Humanities degree I had just begun, I immediately grasped the holistic dimension of what was happening. The violent onslaught against the Palestinian population and their lives could not be understood except within a broader reading that encompassed a project of colonial expansion, a structurally racist society, and a total disregard for the consequences that such a siege would entail—politically, but also humanly and environmentally. I do not wish to hide how, as a student and a young woman, witnessing global inaction, or worse, the media coverage, political escort, and economic support to perpetuate such crimes against life on Earth, has profoundly marked my life path and my studies. Yet, in this climate of disillusionment, powerlessness, and despair, it was precisely my friends from Gaza and the interlocutors I had the honor of speaking with who restored meaning and direction to my life. Where bombs rained down, prayers and words of light and hope were born every day.

This is not an uncritical and rhetorical praise of the supposed superhumanity of the Palestinian people. We cannot afford to fall into the myth that Palestinians are accustomed to torture and death, or the risk of accepting and normalizing their suffering would become too great. They themselves have often repeated this to me: we are not heroes, we are human. We are suffering unspeakably, and we need help. It is from this plea for help, from this cry, that my thesis is born.

This work is a manifesto for the responsibility to which we are called as humans and citizens of this planet. The first act of rebellion is to free oneself from the guilt of a privileged condition you did not choose, because guilt and shock are paralyzing emotions that cannot be an effective guide. They can become shields behind which to hide one's own negligence; they are not an active response. The first revolutionary response is responsibility which, if practiced daily with constancy and dedication, is the most demanding and is the foundation of any attempt aimed at changing the state of reality.

The word 'responsibility' comes from the past participle of the Latin *respondere*: it means

being capable and finding the commitment to take upon oneself the weight of the other's request. Acting responsibly is a reaction to injustice; it is responding to the call of the world we live in. It is saying "here I am" to the world.

Through this thesis, I wanted and hoped to give dignity, form, and humanity to the voices of Palestinians from Gaza. I sought to do this not through an abstract lens, but by anchoring their plea for help to what their bodies and their land endure daily. Because it is precisely in the analysis of the most material and concrete elements of existence—such as water—that the deepest and most brutal nature of the colonial project is revealed. In the chapters of this thesis, I therefore wanted to give this cry an analytical and critical structure, to demonstrate how the suffering and thirst in Gaza are not the result of an inevitable conflict, but of a precise and systematic design.

I began by framing the historical context through the concept of settler colonialism, more precisely focusing on the importance of the ecological dimension in the process of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and in the construction of a racist and discriminatory society. It is not, in fact, merely a process aimed at seizing natural resources, such as land and water, but an entire apparatus that aims to replace one society with another. The attempt is not only to cancel its culture by claiming to rewrite its history, but to eliminate the very possibility of material life for the indigenous population. In the words of Mashaqi et al., the Palestinian experience of Israeli colonization does not only involve suffering and loss of human life<sup>339</sup>. Colonial practices, in fact, continue to undermine that deep and interconnected ecosystemic whole, between the land, its resources, and all the elements that cohabit there, through what Bacon calls 'ecological colonial violence'<sup>340</sup>. The result is the production of a society in which an entire ecology is under siege, and where the systematic and pervasive control of the movement of bodies and thoughts, of resources and time, aims to break that connection between the people themselves and between people and the environment in which they live<sup>341</sup>.

This brought me directly to the heart of my analysis: how did Gaza come to die of thirst during the siege of 2023? And how was it possible that no measure was powerful enough to prevent it? Indeed, the systematic deprivation of water—a policy not unfamiliar to the Israeli government—was a catalyst for anxiety, disease, and physical and mental weakening for the Palestinian population of the Strip. From the very first Zionist settlements in what is

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<sup>339</sup> Mashaqi et al., "Ecology of Erasure", 7

<sup>340</sup> Bacon, "Settler Colonialism as Eco-social Structure", 64

<sup>341</sup> Mashaqi et al, *Ibid.*, 2

commonly called historical Palestine, one of the ways in which control over the population and the land manifested itself was precisely through the almost exclusive domination of water resources. The construction of major water projects involving dams, land reclamation, and the diversion of watercourses forever changed the face of the environmental landscape and the ecosystemic balances of the area. Over time and with the extension of Israeli colonial dominion and its discriminatory laws, more and more Palestinians gained access to water in an unstable and unsatisfactory manner, marking a huge disparity in consumption and quality between the two populations, so much so that one can speak today of an hydro-apartheid <sup>342</sup>. This could not have happened without the use of military violence against water structures and facilities or through policies of forced deprivation. Furthermore, almost unshakeable support for Israel's criminal actions by the world's major powers has allowed the occupying state to perpetrate abuses against the Palestinian population, including through the bureaucratic and legal dimension. Thus, thanks to a practically exclusive dominance on the political and diplomatic level, Israel has been able to impose restrictive orders such as Military Orders No. 158 and 498, through which it can still today prohibit the construction and ownership of new water installations, and sometimes even the repair of those already in use <sup>343</sup>. Even in agreements on the distribution and allocation of water resources, Israel can afford to evade the right to Palestinian national sovereignty. Thus, a systemic and silent violence has slowly been consolidated, consisting of the subtraction of huge quantities of water, necessary for survival and social development, and a regular violation of basic human rights. Precisely because of this strong political and economic support, the historical and geographical narrative of the places and events involving the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories has often been influenced by the colonial interests of Israel and its allies. The entire apparatus of knowledge and research, as well as the media machine—a megaphone and spokesperson for Israeli governmental demands—have contributed to steering the course of events, leading to the devastating siege on Gaza, and simultaneously to the almost total absence of political and diplomatic interventions to prevent the massacre. The monopoly on military, political, and economic force, and on public visibility, are what have made Israel, according to Zeitoun, a hydro-hegemon in the region. This totally unbalanced and unequal system, both from the point of view of access to material resources and from the point of view of the exercise of power and affirmation as existences and political

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<sup>342</sup> Messerschmid, “Hydro-Apartheid and Water Access”

<sup>343</sup> Gasteyer et al., “Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective”, 461

entities, cannot be fully intelligible without an in-depth analysis of the underlying theoretical presuppositions. This led me to reflect on Israeli hydro-hegemony from within a precise philosophical paradigm: that of biopolitics, necropolitics, and the state of exception. Using Foucault's conception, I was able to analyze the biopolitical role of water in Israeli-Palestinian social and political management. It is configured as a fundamental control tool to guarantee a certain social status for the Israeli population and the settlements in the occupied territories. It is an element that gave a boost to the nation's engineering development, contributing to the idea of Israel as a technological and advanced power within an environment deemed hostile. If, on the one hand, Israeli dominance over water meant survival and flourishing for the Jewish population, for Palestinians it became a symbol of oppression, subordination, and injustice. I then applied Mbembe's category of necropolitics—that is, the power to decide who may live and who must die—to Israeli water management. In opposition to the construction of a fanciful Jewish society that would make the desert bloom, a 'death world' was created for indigenous Palestinians, a form of social existence that grants them the status of the 'living dead'<sup>344</sup>. I analysed how Israel has not limited itself to controlling resources, but has structured a system of water apartheid where water becomes a veritable instrument of domination and gradual annihilation. It is a violence that acts slowly, but inexorably, undermining the very possibility of a future. Israeli hegemonic power is thus concretized in what Agamben defines as the State of Exception. Israel is, in fact, in a perpetual state of suspension of law in the name of a presumed need to defend itself from an external enemy and to preserve the security of the nation and its citizens. In this gray zone where there are almost no longer any constraints of legal norms, the power of Israeli action assumes an almost omnipotent nature. The case of Gaza, and in particular the management of water by the occupation both before but especially after October 7, 2023, is characterized as a perfect case of a permanent state of exception.

Since 1967, and in an increasingly violent manner after 2006, Gaza is not simply 'occupied' according to the norms of international law; it is a place where every dimension of life becomes a continuum of the battlefield. From the number of calories permitted to Gazans, to the materials and goods that may or may not enter through the crossings, to the regular sabotage of the water supply, the life of every Palestinian in Gaza is daily militarized. The siege itself is the materialization of this state of exception: it is decided who and what can enter, and water, in its pipes and facilities, becomes the primary vehicle of this exception.

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<sup>344</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 109

Thus, blocking the entry of humanitarian aid, bombing power plants that feed wells and treatment plants, and preventing the repair of sewage networks becomes acceptable collateral damage or a veritable combat strategy. The effect is the collapse of the Palestinian population's survival in the most literal sense. Water is transformed into a weapon and becomes an instrument with which to produce what Agamben calls 'bare life': a life reduced to biological survival, exposed to death or the fear of death at every moment, and upon which sovereign power can exercise absolute dominion<sup>345</sup>. However, this power is not a monolithic entity. Through the concept of rhizomatic power defined by Deleuze and Guattari, I analyzed how Israeli control over Palestinians is not merely an order handed down from above, materially expressed through bombs and, more insidiously, through military decrees. On the contrary, it is a dominion exercised in a predominantly capillary, diffuse manner, branching out and penetrating every crevice of daily life and the land itself. From a military point of view, this is evident in the fragmentation of the territory through the institutionalization of physical barriers. Examples include checkpoints, walls, roads passable only by Israelis and forbidden to Palestinians, and facilities usable only by the Israeli population and prohibited to Palestinians, as in the case of water supply and treatment plants. There is no single command center that decides the thirst of a village, or which aqueduct, desalination or wastewater treatment plant, which health infrastructure or group of people should be the military target. What governs is a chaotic anarchy of capillary disorder and destruction. Command and the exercise of authoritarian power are not centralized, but destined for a network of officers, technicians, bureaucrats, and soldiers who, daily, apply and make concrete the hydro-hegemony. If there is no heart of command, it is much more difficult to destroy it, because it is everywhere and nowhere specific, and for this reason, very difficult to counter.

It is in the final chapter, however, that I return to the events of the present time. Through the lucid statements and testimonies from some Palestinians in the Strip who wished to share their experiences with me, I tried to reconstruct the effort, suffering, and injustice caused by the policy of deprivation and obstruction of the water supply. In this section, I highlighted how the occupation and destruction of Gaza that began on October 7, 2023, are not only part of the Israeli colonial necropolitical project, but also a continuous and sadly congruent aspect of the regional historical framework. The blockade on humanitarian aid and the supply of fuel has, in fact, made it impossible to operate water extraction pumps and treatment plants, drastically and dramatically reducing the quantity and quality of water Gazans could obtain daily. On the

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<sup>345</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11

other hand, targeted attacks on the survival infrastructure of the population, including desalination plants, wells, aqueducts, but also the cisterns of health facilities, hospitals, and schools, have made Gaza a hell for those who survived the bombings, shootings, landmines, arbitrary arrests, and abuses.

This thesis is not, and has never intended to be, an exhaustive work on the subject. On the other hand, I believe it is almost impossible to do so today, with the information we have access to and that which we have lost forever. Nevertheless, it is an initial attempt at critical analysis of the weaponization of water in a context that the International Court of Justice has deemed potentially definable as genocide <sup>346</sup>.

What would transform this thesis into a highly relevant interdisciplinary and political contribution could be a deeper investigation into the legal interpretation of criminal actions involving the deprivation of essential goods and fundamental rights, such as water. Moreover, this would potentially strengthen the premises of this dissertation, effectively proposing what the practical and real consequences of the events highlighted by this research might be, in addition to all the other information, data, written and audio-visual testimonies that have been collected so far by various humanitarian bodies, international organizations, and academic figures. I consider it an extremely relevant aspect to examine in the academic field and to review all possible intentional acts aimed at starving the Palestinian population of Gaza of water and to show how they could reinforce the charge of genocide brought against Israel and be included among the possible evidence for the prosecution. What are the legal consequences, what are the international obligations towards a State that has perpetrated and continues to carry out genocidal acts such as the deprivation of water and other means of subsistence? To date, no significant measures have been taken in this regard; indeed, many countries are still involved in friendly political and economic relations favorable to the State of Israel and its interests. These relationships, in practice, end up supporting and legitimizing a project whose objective is the elimination of the Palestinian population, culture, and history from the occupied lands. It is the silent but industrious complicity of those who, while not dropping bombs on the front line, provide the tools and resources for it to happen.

It is here that the concept of individual responsibility from which I started links back to the dimension of collective and systemic responsibility. It is that of states, international institutions, but also of universities. It is the responsibility of those who have the power to apply laws, impose sanctions, and interrupt complicit agreements. And it is precisely in this

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<sup>346</sup> OXFAM, *Water War Crimes*, 10

space that academic responsibility is situated. What projects do our universities entertain, and to whom do they bind us? What narratives do our study programs legitimize? Deconstructing the power mechanisms that sustain the occupation, giving space to Palestinians in university classrooms, shedding light and clarity on the hidden complicities in cooperation agreements—this is an act of collective responsibility. It is a way to break and dissipate that rhizomatic power, refusing to be one of its nodes. As a student and researcher in Environmental Humanities, I can only appeal to the academic community itself and underline how this branch of studies can be fundamental to fully grasp what is happening. Precisely by virtue of its kaleidoscopic interpretive lens and its transdisciplinary approach to reality, the contribution of the environmental humanities would be considerable in gaining an overall view of the impacts of the Israeli siege. In a context where environmental destruction is used as a weapon to destroy a people, studying the Environmental Humanities means not making a sharp distinction between the 'humanitarian question' and the 'environmental question'. In the case of this study, it means showing how the inequality of consumption between settlers and colonized, and the deliberate sabotage of supply means, are not 'collateral damage' of the violence, but are part of the violence itself. It means understanding that uprooting an entire field of centuries-old cedars, as in the story told by Saber, is not only an act that destroys the bond of entire generations of families with their lands, or an act against an entire cultural system, but is configured as an action against the ecosystem itself. Certainly, in this thesis, the analytical focus has concentrated mainly on the direct consequences that water deprivation has had on the human Palestinian population in Gaza. However, it could be a significant contribution to investigate more deeply how contamination and water scarcity, the siege-induced famine, as well as the bombings, and the environmental and urban devastation have impacted human and non-human relations, or the life, habits, and behaviors of non-human animals in the Strip.

My thesis, therefore, aims to be a concrete example of how the Environmental Humanities can respond to the crisis that the Israeli-Palestinian issue has placed before us. It is an attempt to exercise that individual responsibility which, added to others, can participate in the creation of a collective responsibility that is so dramatically lacking today.

# APPENDIX

The ethnographic research was structured starting from a list of questions. This is the rough sketch of the list:

## General questions:

- 1) How is Gaza now divided (which are the areas, how many camps)? How was before October 7, 2023?
- 2) how can you have access to drinkable water now? Rainy water, water tanks, underground water ...
- 3) How could you have access to drinkable water before the October 7, 2023? How did the water distribution work? Everyone usually paid a quote of water, or you collected money to buy it (by everyone's means, according to everyone's necessities)...?
- 4) who is deciding now how much water comes in? What are the differences with the situation before October 7, 2023?
- 5) Which are the distribution points? Which were the distribution points before October 7, 2023?

## Specific questions:

- 1) who (organization/institution) is responsible for distribution and main water sources availability
- 2) what are the places/methods of distribution
- 3) which methods for purification:  
when the water is available, is it already clean? If not, what are the methods you use in your area to make it drinkable? Have you seen ways to make water drinkable that you've never seen? Please, if you can, show me with a video
- 4) how much water can a general family afford in your area?
- 5) Now that your water supplies are limited, what do you use it for? Please, if you can, tell me about some of your habits and daily water routine: before and now (cooking, drinking, cleaning, washing clothes, shower ...)
- 6) Write/Tell me every detail, episodes, information you think is relevant.

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