

Surveillance and Punishment: How the Palestinian Body Becomes a Hostage



In her book *Engineering Oppression: The Politics of Controlling Silent Bodies*, researcher Nour Badr asserts that any attempt to understand the violence Palestinians are subjected to must begin by situating it within the broader framework of the Zionist project namely, one rooted in the removal and erasure of the Indigenous population.

Badr explains that the settler-colonial structure in Palestine is not based merely on domination or exploitation of the native population, but rather on viewing their very existence as an obstacle to be eliminated. At the heart of this logic lies the Palestinian body—a body targeted for killing, expulsion, or restriction; a body perceived as a threat to a colonial project that seeks land without its people.

She also argues that Michel Foucault's theories offer a compelling lens through which to understand the settler-colonial state's strategies of elimination, particularly the practice of "surveillance and punishment," which Israeli authorities apply across various institutions, turning them into spaces of control and domination.

In the Palestinian context, military checkpoints, prisons, and hospitals have long served as clear spaces of discipline and control. Israel uses these sites to subject Palestinian bodies to scrutiny, surveillance, and punishment, aiming to reproduce

them as restrained, submissive bodies—trapped in the minutiae of their movement and daily lives.

This article examines how Israel has intensified its use of surveillance and punishment across these spaces since October 7, 2023, and explores the resulting impacts on the Palestinian body.

Instruments of Subjugation and Control

Following the Second Intifada and the rising tide of Palestinian youth resistance, Israel established hundreds of military checkpoints throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Ostensibly created as “security measures,” these checkpoints in practice function as tools to dominate Palestinian movement and bodies.

They are far from neutral security structures. Rather, they serve as mechanisms of subjugation, restructuring Palestinians’ daily mobility. Palestinians are forced to pass through narrow gates; their vehicles are searched, and their IDs scrutinized leaving their bodies constantly exposed to the gaze of control and domination.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has re-established several permanent military posts in Gaza, including the Nitzarim checkpoint. These fortified points have turned the Palestinian body into a direct target for humiliation and coercion. People face constant inspections of their cars and belongings; arbitrary stops, beatings, and detentions are common. Every crossing becomes a complete experience of physical and psychological violence.

In the West Bank, the presence of checkpoints has intensified significantly. Some have been privatized, operated by armed security firms. Others are deliberately deployed to escalate physical and psychological pressure on Palestinians.

Abuse and physical coercion at these checkpoints have grown exponentially. Degrading strip searches, prolonged detentions, and the systematic confiscation of personal items are now routine. Men and women alike are subjected to calculated humiliation and prolonged bodily control.

This tightening of restrictions reflects a new Israeli policy one that imposes a coercive environment where basic daily movement becomes a form of resistance. The Palestinian body, increasingly immobilized and surveilled, is now a primary target of domination whether through sudden road closures, enforced separation between towns, or the strategic suffocation of urban life to coerce migration.

Spectacles of Humiliation and Visual Suppression

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has escalated its repressive practices inside its prisons, employing a combination of material and symbolic violence. The

Palestinian body has become a canvas for showcasing colonial power and reasserting dominance.

Researchers Ashraf Abu Aram and I'tiraf Al-Rimawi, in their paper *The Palestinian Body as a Performative Interface of Settler Colonialism: Israeli Violence After October 7*, argue that the intensification of Israeli violence in prisons is not merely punitive, but a symbolic mechanism to reproduce hegemony not just over the inmates, but over Palestinian society as a whole.

The authors contend that since that date, Israeli control over prison life has morphed from individual punishment to a system of visual humiliation and symbolic repression. Denial of food, medicine, and hygiene products is weaponized not only to inflict suffering but to project dominance to craft specific forms of pain that turn the prisoner's body into a public warning of Israel's enduring power.

These punitive practices aim to strip detainees of all protection—rendering their bodies “disposable,” subject to unchecked abuse. The researchers point to the concept of “bare life,” wherein detainees are deprived of any legal or moral shield and are subjected to uninterrupted subjugation.

Even after release, the Palestinian body continues to function as a symbolic tool—exhausted and demoralized, it becomes a lasting embodiment of colonial punishment. The prison, in this light, is not merely a site of isolation, but a factory of symbolic and bodily submission, where pain becomes a tool to reconstruct identity and repress collective resistance.

Hostage to Bombardment and Siege

Following October 7, 2023, hospitals in Gaza have ceased to function as sanctuaries. Instead, they have become spaces where the rule of law collapses and human life is stripped of protection. In her paper *The Hospital – A Manifestation of the Gazan Body*, researcher Rima Zakout explains how Israel has transformed hospitals into arenas of bodily control. Patients and healthcare workers endure physical and psychological torture, living a life devoid of rights or protection.

According to Zakout, violations extend beyond denial of care to include kidnappings of medical staff, targeted bombings, theft of corpses, destruction of vital infrastructure, and the cutting off of electricity and water.

Patients are denied life-saving treatment. The hospital has become an extension of the occupation's strategy to control life and death—to dominate the Palestinian body in what should be the most protected space.

In the West Bank, hospitals have also faced repeated sieges and incursions by

Israeli forces. These actions have turned the wounded Palestinian body into a direct target. Practices include preventing access to care, obstructing medical staff, searching ambulances, interrogating the wounded, and even arresting patients all of which place injured bodies in immediate danger of death. Patients have even been exposed to tear gas and explosives while lying in hospital courtyards.

Through such practices, the Palestinian body becomes a hostage within the hospital—an institution now stripped of its role as a haven of healing. The hospital becomes another arena where human life is devalued and systematically weakened.

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