

“Travelling for Dignity”

Navigating (im)mobility regimes in Palestine after 7 October 2023

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Abstract

In the occupied West Bank, the aftermath of the Israeli war on Gaza, combined with the simultaneous offensive by the settlers' movement, triggered a wave of violence and economic breakdown, leading to a sharp deterioration of living conditions. This article tracks the escape routes, particularly those leading to Europe, which were followed by a group of Palestinians from the northern West Bank city of Nablus after 7 October 2023, exploring the discourses and meanings they ascribe to their migration attempts in a context in which settler colonialism has been showing its worst side. In the West Bank, Palestinians seeking to flee to Europe face significant limitations regarding formal and regular channels to travel and resettle elsewhere. This article explores the complex and nuanced attitudes of West Bank Palestinians towards mobility regimes as well as their ability to navigate these constraints and opportunities as a form of adaptation to worsening living conditions after 7 October. In this context, one way to challenge and circumvent mobility regimes relies on international solidarity with Palestine, which can allow would-be travellers to convert their social and symbolic capital into tangible support to facilitate mobility.

Keywords

Palestine/Israel; 7 October; Mobility Regimes; Migration; Borders; Solidarity

Introduction

On 7 October 2023, during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, a group of militants from Hamas' military wing entered Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, causing the deaths of approximately 1,200 Israeli civilians and military personnel. Additionally, around 250 people were kidnapped, taken prisoners, and taken to the Gaza Strip. The Israeli response in retaliation for the attacks of 7 October swiftly escalated, with many activists and observers describing it as the culmination of a prolonged process of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Pappe 2006). This event is seen as a continuation of the *Nakba* (catastrophe) that began in 1947-48 (Abu Saif 2024). It can indeed be viewed as a radical expression of settler colonialism's aim to eliminate, transfer, fragment, and erase Palestinian presence in the Holy Land (Sen 2020).

The Israeli offensive had its most devastating effects on the civilian population and infrastructure of the Gaza Strip, leading to widespread bombardments, evacuation orders, the complete or partial destruction of homes, apocalyptic displacement, growing number of sick, injured and missing people, and more than 40,000 deaths (OCHA 2024a). Although less intense and ferocious, the crackdown on the Gaza uprising and the acceleration of the genocide has led to a deterioration in the living conditions of all "categories" of Palestinians within Palestine/Israel. West Bank Palestinians,

Palestinian citizens of Israel¹, residents of East Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugees were all affected to some extent by various forms of collective punishment and repression by the colonial authorities.

In the occupied West Bank, the aftermath of the Gaza War, combined with the simultaneous offensive by the Israeli settler movement, triggered a wave of violence and economic breakdown, leading to a sharp deterioration of living conditions. Faced with the dramatic worsening of their political and socio-economic circumstances, West Bank Palestinians endured material, security, and psychological hardship. These repercussions heightened or triggered their desire to escape and seek “normalcy” elsewhere.

This article tracks the escape routes, particularly those leading to Europe, which were followed by a group of Palestinians from the northern West Bank city of Nablus after October 7. These plans arose as they contended with an escalating pattern of military-settler violence and a resultant economic collapse. It explores the discourses and meanings they ascribe to their migration attempts in a context where settler colonialism has been showing its worst side. In the West Bank, Palestinians increasingly desire to flee to Europe, yet face significant constraints regarding formal and regular channels to travel and resettle elsewhere. If for Palestinians in Gaza the only option is to pay exorbitant sums to travel brokers in Egypt (Ahmed and Michaelson 2024; Procter 2024), those fleeing the West Bank navigate between more varied possibilities and tactics, shaped by their ability to accrue different kinds of resources.

Following this introduction, the second section introduces some key theoretical concepts adopted to better understand and frame the trajectories of Palestinian mobility after 7 October. The third section situates the article within the body of scholarship on Palestinian mobilities in the context of the Israeli settler-colonial regime in the West Bank. The fourth section outlines the political context in which this ethnographic research project developed and the methodology employed to collect the empirical material. In the fifth section, I discuss the key findings, exploring various travel trajectories post-7-October through an analysis of the intertwined political, economic, and pleasure drivers, as well as the limits of individual agency in finding escape routes from the settler-colonial context in Palestine. The sixth section delves into the issue of travel in relation to the lack of dignity, illustrated by the ethnographic account of one of the most representative migration trajectories.

Mobility regimes, mobility capital, and solidarity

Mobilities are not fixed or absolute, but rather relational and experiential, with people in motion moving in various ways and perceiving one another differently depending on how they themselves are moving (Adey 2006). The unequal distribution of opportunities to decide when, how, and where to move serves as a factor of stratification and differentiation, resulting in highly unequal access to the freedom of movement. Furthermore, the mobility of some may depend on, or even require, the immobility of others. To address this “politics of mobility” (Cresswell 2010), Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) have introduced the concept of “mobility regimes”, that is, sets of regulations, mechanisms, and procedures which multiply, control, and determine constraints and opportunities for mobility affecting and constructing different categories of people on the move. This social

stratification and categorisation is tied to the unequal distribution of “mobility capital” (Moret 2020), i.e. the economic, juridical, symbolic, and social resources affecting the capacity of people to exert control over their movements. In the case of Palestinians in the West Bank, their capacity to move is constrained and mediated by overlapping mobility regimes, which are constructed and differentiated based on Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian Authority (PA) regulations and other related control mechanisms, and on the visa and asylum policies of destination countries, which facilitate and normalize the movements of some groups while limiting and problematizing the movements of others (Schapendonk *et al.* 2018). The capacity of people to create opportunities for movement from Palestine/Israel to more desirable destinations is shaped by the intersection of various factors, including legal status, gender, age, religion affiliation, and social class. Beyond these elements, this article foregrounds an additional factor with significant influence on their aspirations and possibilities for travelling: the personal ability to mobilise growing solidarity with Palestinians to construct escape routes through restrictive mobility regimes.

In this article, I adopt a relational and material perspective on solidarity (Amigoni, Ghaffari, and Jano Forthcoming), defining it as a transnational flow of energy activating a repertoire of actions, coalitions, situations, and alliances with the consequence to enhance the mobility capital of irregularised travellers. Within this framework, I explore the trajectories of my Palestinian interlocutors by observing the personal, relational and networking capacities to transform expressions and manifestation of solidarity into tangible support that facilitates their travel plans. In this context, global and transnational solidarity with the Palestinian resistance has circulated and shifted from being an abstract political stance to manifesting itself through personal relationships of friendship, brotherhood, and intimacy (Bonnin *et al.* Forthcoming). For their travelling projects, my Palestinian interlocutors have relied on the social capital accrued over the years through numerous interactions with people supporting the Palestinian resistance, as well as new expressions of solidarity inspired by recent events. This solidarity becomes a force capable of subverting and challenging racial and colonial hierarchies and mobility regimes. The complex interactions between people on the move, (im)mobility regimes, and solidarity flows contribute to shaping differentiated migratory trajectories.

While tracking the journeys of my interlocutors from Nablus, I observed how their reasons for leaving are hardly ever based on traditional dichotomies, such as those between forced and voluntary migration, political and economic mobility, and distinctions between migrants and tourists. For my Palestinian interlocutors, the aftermath of 7 October was the catalyst that ignited a series of personal desires and suppressed motivations, activating a search for better opportunities abroad and prompting them to find ways to embark on journeys which evolved dynamically as they unfolded (Collyer 2007; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Crawley and Jones 2021). Their travel experiences often went from being temporary to being permanent or vice versa, shifting between different legal categories (e.g. tourist, migrant, asylum seeker) and frequently changing the social labels with which they identify (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). For those with the necessary capital to leave, travelling became a resource to deal with a perceived lack of dignity. As Schapendonk, van Liempt, and Spierings (2015: 49) argue, “‘the journey’—as an embodied form of travel from one place to the other—is a fruitful analytical starting point to bring migration and tourism studies in closer dialogue with each other”.

(Im)mobile Palestinians

In the Palestinian/Israeli context, the Zionist settler-colonial project can be analysed as a driving force of both mobility and immobility. The displacement of Palestinian refugees after the State of Israel was founded in 1948 and following the 1967 Six-Day War is a historical example of forced migration caused by settler colonialism's attempts to erase Palestinian presence and displace Palestinians to neighbouring Arab states, resulting in a stateless refugee population (Morris 2004; Peteet 2005; Knudsen and Hanafi 2010; Gren 2015; Feldman 2018). In addition to mass population transfer, the continuous expulsion of the Palestinian people has been consistently driven by legal, "micro-political", and ordinary means, such as the forced evictions that have been taking place in East Jerusalem since 2021 (Kingsley 2021), the designation of "firing zones" in the West Bank (Hass 2014), the confiscation of Palestinian land, and the expansion of Israeli settlements (Darr 2014).

If, in the 1990s, the Oslo Accords resulted in the return of sections of the Palestinian diaspora to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Hanieh 2011), the precarious living conditions along with the worsening of safety and socio-economic circumstances caused new waves of outward flows (particularly among young and well-educated individuals) towards Europe, North America, Jordan, and the Gulf countries in the 2000s (Hilal 2007; Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin and Perrin 2011; Lindholm 2021). Additionally, some scholars have examined the cross-border movements of Palestinians citizens of Israel, who are often compelled to travel between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in search of more affordable goods, services, and opportunities (McGahern 2023).

While creating conditions that push Palestinians out, autonomous mobility and circulation within Israel and the West Bank are heavily regulated and controlled by the Israeli state through a range of military, juridical, and architectural tools, including IDs, permits, checkpoints, the separation barrier, barbed wire fences, roadblocks, settlements, and land colonisation (Taraki 2006; Petti 2007; Weizman 2007; Tawil-Souri 2012; Peteet 2017; Berda 2018). Israel keeps a stratified population registry for everyone living in Israel and the occupied territories, classifying residents into colonial hierarchies based on coloured IDs². Palestinian residents of the West Bank cannot legally cross the Green Line or enter Israeli settlements without obtaining a permit from the Israeli Civil Administration (Al-Qadi 2018). Handel (2014) argues that the freedom of movement enjoyed by Israeli settlers is secured only by restricting and subordinating the movement of Palestinians in the West Bank, which is achieved through the expansion of fences and bypass roads into Palestinian space, with the aim of creating a contiguous Jewish space while reducing Palestinian communities to separate islands.

In fact, Israeli settler and current Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, openly admitted the existence of two distinct mobility regimes based on ethnic and racial lines during a television interview, stating:

My right, the right of my wife and my children to move around Judea and Samaria [the biblical name for the West Bank] is more important than freedom of movement for the Arabs.

Palestinians often feel trapped and immobile (Bishara 2015; Bowman 2015), so much so that the occupied territories have been defined as the "biggest prison on earth" (Pappe 2018). As the Israeli NGO B'Tselem has observed:

Restricting movement is one of the main tools that Israel employs to enforce its regime of occupation over the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories. Israel restricts the movement of Palestinians within the Occupied Territories, between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, into Israel, and abroad. Only Palestinians are restricted in this manner, while settlers and other civilians – Israeli and foreign – are free to travel (see: https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement).

The transnational mobility of Palestinians and the challenges they face when attempting to move beyond the Palestinian/Israeli space have received less academic attention. In this context, it can be argued that Palestinians experience two kinds of mobility injustice: one is rooted in Israel's apartheid-based mobility regime within Palestine/Israel; the other one is enforced by the global apartheid-based mobility regime which aims to exclude subaltern citizens of the Global South from freely moving to the Global North (Van Houtum 2010; Sheller 2018). These Israeli and European mobility regimes impose immobility on many Palestinians in the West Bank, as the majority of them lack the economic, social, and cultural capital to secure the documentation required for Schengen visas and to cover travel expenses.

Unlike other countries and socio-cultural contexts with well-established migratory traditions (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011), it is fair to say that there has been a form of resistance to the development of a strong migration culture in the occupied Palestinian territories. On the contrary, in the West Bank one can perceive a shared, albeit silent, sentiment that views emigration abroad as a form of surrender to the Jewish colonisation. Even among the generations of Palestinians that were forcibly displaced during the *Nakba*, many people never accepted the idea of abandoning their hope to return to their homes and saw their life in the refugee camps as the tangible proof of the urgency of their return³ (Aruri 2001). Rather than a culture of migration, West Bank Palestinians assert to embrace a culture of steadfastness (*sumud*)—a commitment to staying (and returning) at any cost. *Sumud*, which has been analysed by numerous scholars (Halper 2006; Roy 2016; Hammad and Tribe 2021), stands distinct from *muqawama* (active resistance). It refers to perseverance and resilience in everyday life, manifested through practices that maintain and reaffirm the Palestinian presence, both physically and symbolically (see Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Context and methodology

Known as “the mountain of fire” (*Jabal An-Nahr*) due to its active involvement in the second *Intifada* (2000-2005), Nablus became one of Palestine's most significant urban and economic centres after the state of Israel was established and coastal towns such as Haifa and Jaffa were lost (Doumani 1995). With a current population exceeding 150,000, it is home to the largest Palestinian university and three refugee camps which are primarily populated by descendants of families from Jaffa. Unlike other Palestinian cities, Nablus has largely remained outside the main flows of international tourism and pilgrimage to the Holy Land, largely due to movement restrictions which were imposed following the outbreak of the second *Intifada* (Kelly 2008). Only a few groups of Orthodox Christian pilgrims venture into the northern West Bank, drawn by the imposing Orthodox church built around Jacob's

Well, which is located just opposite the main entrance to the Balata refugee camp. Not far from there, the tomb of Patriarch Joseph is worshipped by groups of Israeli settlers who enter the city every month under military protection, causing clashes and riots⁴. Before 7 October, a small number of backpackers, volunteers, and researchers also visited Nablus, spurring the establishment of accommodation facilities and the growth of a modest tourist economy.

I became part of the international community living in Nablus, when I travelled to the city for a research project in 2018 and started studying Arabic at An-Najah National University. Following that ethnographic experience, I returned to Nablus in 2019, 2021, and 2022, which allowed me to cultivate and nurture a network of social contacts and personal friendships. Most of my interlocutors belong to Nablus's middle class, which is mainly concentrated in the western part of the city; they have learned English mainly through their numerous interactions with expats and international tourists. Despite originating from families relatively well-positioned in the Palestinian society, with employment in the public sector or private companies, the boundaries between the middle and popular classes in Palestine remain porous. At the time, some of them worked in Israel or in West Bank settlements, alternating between working without a contract and working across the border with a regular contract and a permit. For some of them, Israeli society (which is separated juridically and militarily by the wall) represented the most disturbing and attractive aspects of western values. In our conversations, some of them expressed support for one bi-national democratic state (Halper 2021) and often crossed the wall without documents to experience European "modernity" beyond the Green Line. However, despite projecting their desires and aspirations elsewhere, most of them did not even consider the option of leaving permanently, either due to legal and material difficulties or because of the sense of responsibility they felt towards their household and their land.

When I returned to Nablus in 2022, I found that tensions were already escalating due to the emergence of a new Palestinian armed resistance group based in the old city, known as the Lion's Den (*'Arin al-Usud*), which had formed in August 2022 following the killing of Ibrahim al-Nabulsi and the subsequent Israeli repression (Barghouti and Patel 2022). Even then, my Palestinian interlocutors (mostly young men who were children during the outbreak of second *Intifada*) expressed growing impatience with the policies of closure, economic regression, boredom, and cyclical violence regularly affecting their acquaintances, friends, and relatives. The events of 7 October 2023 put an end to any hope of change and improvement. In the West Bank, the sealing of the border along the Green Line left hundreds of thousands of Palestinians working in Israel – who represented one of the most indispensable sources of income for Palestinian families (Bornstein 2002; Hilal 2007) – jobless. Public sector workers in the PA were no longer getting paid due to Israel interrupting transfers for Palestinian custom duties, income tax, and value added tax – a financial war carried out on several occasions as a way of retaliating against decisions which were deemed hostile (UNCTAD 2020)⁵.

In addition to economic hardship, there was a severe deterioration in security conditions for Palestinians. In response to the ongoing activities of the Lions' Den, the Israeli army laid siege to the area, restricting most of the entrances to Nablus while escalating raids within the city, particularly during the first month following 7 October. Moreover, the growing sense of impunity, bolstered by Western governments' support for Israel's "right to self-defence", led to a sharp rise in settler violence, supported by the Israeli army. As of October 2024, OCHA (2024b) reports that more than

700 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Settlers' aggressions against Palestinians massively increased, particularly in the rural areas and villages, making the prospect of movements out of Nablus increasingly uncertain and dangerous (see Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

This article is based on a series of fourteen interviews to my Palestinian interlocutors from Nablus which were conducted after 7 October, both in person and online. The interviews addressed issues and problems related to Palestinians' experiences of internal and international mobility in the context of intensified settler colonialism. Selected excerpts are cited in the paper to reinforce the main arguments. However, my ethnographic account is part of a broader participant observation project on the lives and migratory trajectories of West Bank Palestinians that I have been working on for several years. How did the consequences of 7 October boost the desire to flee among Palestinians in the West Bank? What were the main motivations expressed by my interlocutors regarding their plans to leave, despite multiple restrictions? What primary escape tactics did they deploy? What kinds of mobility regimes did they navigate and which kinds of solidarity networks did they rely on to facilitate their plans?

In search of travel opportunities

A few days after 7 October, I called Majdi⁶ to hear his perspective on Hamas' operation. Excitedly, he said, "I woke up at 6 a.m., waking up all my friends and telling them to turn on the television. This is the first time I see the Israelis suffer what they do to us every single day. I'm sure the moment of liberation is coming. I hope this will be the first step towards victory and gaining our rights." His initial astonishment at the attacks of 7 October soon gave way to the harsh reality of the violent war waged by the Israeli state on Gaza, along with the political, economic, psychological, and social repercussions on Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank. Knowing that he had always been drawn to the Israeli lifestyle, I was struck by how suddenly his language changed. He began referring to "Israel" as the "Zionist entity" that "stole our land" and said "I don't want to deal with them ever again. None of them seem to show any empathy for what they are doing in Gaza." A few months later, it became clear that living conditions in Nablus had become unbearable, which convinced him to consider the migration option for the first time in his life:

In the past, some people hoped to go abroad to improve their lives, but nowadays it has become a necessity. I used to be against emigration and leaving Palestine, thinking that if we all left, who would remain? However, unfortunately, if you want to survive and have a life, you have to leave. I was against my friends leaving the country, but now I find myself supporting their decision to go because there is no future here, it's dangerous, risky, and there is widespread depression and hardship in Palestine.

The pressure is mounting. They put us in a situation that forces us to think our only option is dreaming of getting a visa to go to the States, Canada, or Europe. Their strategy seems to be to indirectly expel as many Palestinians as possible. While they don't forcibly remove us, they create conditions that compel

us to leave. When faced with such harsh circumstances and pervasive difficulties, the only way to live and survive seems to involve leaving. (video interview with Majdi, 23-12-2023)

Majdi had previously travelled to Europe as a tourist. Although he is nearly certain he could obtain a Schengen visa, his responsibility as the eldest son makes him hesitant to consider a permanent move abroad. Instead, he had chosen to take a short break, spending two weeks in Europe as a necessary respite after months of mounting psychological pressure. He identified the severe restrictions on internal mobility as a key factor that makes life in Nablus unbearable. He emphasised this issue during his stay at my home in Italy:

To be honest, at first, we hadn't realised how serious the issue was. But after being unable to leave the city for almost nine months, it becomes overwhelming. And if you do manage to get out, it's always risky. We're human, after all. The constant pressure and stress are immense, and it's taking a toll on our well-being. Everyone needs a break and recently it feels like we're on the verge of a breakdown, like we might have a heart attack or suffer some serious physical harm due to the stress. (interview with Majdi, 11-05-2024)

Despite the temporary nature of Majdi's trip and his decision to return to Palestine, his reasons for travelling closely reflect the desires of many "green" Palestinians in the West Bank, whose socio-economic, security, and psychological conditions have deteriorated significantly since 7 October, as we discussed in one of our conversations:

For me, I really needed a break; otherwise, it would have been very detrimental to my health. What we're experiencing in Palestine is so illogical and unbelievable that it's crucial to step away from it. All Palestinians need this but, unfortunately, most cannot escape their circumstances, which is very bad. Having the opportunity to leave, even briefly, can be incredibly helpful. Sometimes, when you return it's hard, because seeing how others live can make you reflect on your own situation. Comparing the comfort and ease of life elsewhere with the struggles back home can make you feel disheartened. There is no point in comparing. It's about taking the opportunity to breathe, getting a bit of relief from the daily oppression, and giving yourself some space to cope with the constant pressure. (video interview with Majdi, 03-07-2024)

Their growing desire to escape is not only at odds with the uneven mobility regimes and associated control mechanisms imposed by Israeli settler colonialism (Tawil-Souri 2012), but also with the restrictive migration policies which target aspiring travellers from the Global South. Palestinians looking to reach to Europe, for example, have to face the restrictions and seize the opportunities of the Schengen visa regime (Zampagni 2017). For my middle class Palestinian interlocutors, Schengen visas represent the primary means for attempting to escape. "There's no other option..." was the response given by many of my interlocutors. "Many people use Schengen visas to enter Europe, then apply for asylum..."

Even though Schengen visas allow holders to travel within the entire Schengen area for up to three months, they are issued by the consulates of single European countries, serving as the primary state mechanism for filtering and sorting "desirable" and "undesirable" individuals (Bigo and Guild 2005; Gaibazzi 2016). Factors such as social class, age, gender, religion, and employment status play a key role in determining who is to be considered a legitimate traveller and therefore granted access to

regular mobility. As Stephan Scheel (2017: 41) notes, “in practice, the Schengen visa regime restricts foreign nationals’ access to the EU by introducing an entry ticket, a Schengen visa, receipt of which is subject to conditions that a significant share of the population cannot fulfill and that often do not correspond to local circumstances”.

Given the obstacles to obtaining Israeli permits to visit embassies and consulates in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, private companies like VFS Global in Ramallah provide intermediary services for West Bank Palestinians applying for visas, reflecting the global trend towards outsourcing visa application management (Sánchez-Barrueco 2018). Moreover, for those with limited experience, turning to travel agencies is a viable option to gather the necessary documents, although it adds an extra layer of mediation. These agencies handle all aspects of the application process, including scheduling appointments with VFS, verifying documents such as proof of financial means and employment certificates, purchasing travel medical insurance, and arranging flight reservations and accommodation to show during the visa application process. Hassan, who has considerable experience in travelling abroad, described the selection process as follows:

To begin with, you need to have a strong financial statement, which many people lack. Additionally, you must provide proof of employment, but a significant portion of the population is unemployed or works in the black economy. These two requirements are major obstacles for Palestinians. Even if you meet all the requirements, the process remains cumbersome. You need to book an appointment, which often takes 2 to 3 months. For instance, a friend of mine had to wait until March next year just for an appointment to apply for a US visa. For European visas, you typically wait 1 to 2 months for an appointment and then about one more month to receive the visa. This makes the entire process nearly three months long. Thus, planning a trip for a visit or a holiday is complicated. The bureaucratic procedures and stringent requirements make the process frustrating, especially when you realize you can’t meet them. (video interview with Hassan, 07-07-2024)

Due to the more severe restrictions on internal mobility enforced through checkpoints, travelling to Ramallah to process visa applications is far from easy or safe. However, even after securing a visa, West Bank Palestinians face numerous practical and legal obstacles to leaving their hometowns. They are not allowed to fly out of Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Instead, they must travel by *servis* (shared taxis) from Nablus to Jericho, as the Allenby Bridge (*Jisr al-Malek Hussein*) is the only operational crossing point for West Bank Palestinians wishing to reach Jordan and continue their journey. The border terminal between the West Bank and Jordan is controlled by the Israeli Airports Authority, but many of my interlocutors perceive it as a “triple” border: Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian.

As you know, we don’t have our own airport. So, if we want to fly to Europe or the States, we have to travel via Jordan. How can we get to Jordan? Firstly, we face obstacles even just to leave our city due to the numerous checkpoints. Often, we get stuck at these checkpoints for two or three hours just trying to leave our city. Once we manage to get out, we need to reach Jericho, which is close to the border. Crossing into Jordan is financially exhausting, as we have to pay taxes at each checkpoint—Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian. Just imagine paying three sets of taxes only to leave your country. The whole journey can take about seven to eight hours, just to reach Jordan and get to the airport. And the problem is that the bridge is not open 24 hours a day. It’s closed on Fridays and Saturdays due to Shabbat. (video interview with Hassan, 07-07-2024)

It is clear that the obstacles to travelling abroad are closely intertwined with the many difficulties of internal mobility (King and Skeldon 2010). Moreover, the numerous financial expenses along with the deep economic recession in Palestine can make it extremely challenging to raise the resources needed for visa and travel expenses, even once the legal barriers have been overcome. After the start of the war, many Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank turned to online crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe or JustGiving, a tactic which has already been observed in many other war contexts, such as Ukraine or the 2014 Gaza War (Rajvanshi 2024). These platforms are utilised to reach and (re)activate solidarity from abroad, converting it into actual support.

Ahmed is a 32-year-old man from Nablus who alternated between long periods of unemployment and odd jobs as a bricklayer in West Bank Israeli settlements. Over the last few years, he has managed to build an international network of friends and accrue social capital, mainly in Europe and the US. Ahmed's fluent English, affable manners, and sociable nature have allowed him to forge strong connections with numerous backpackers, tourists, volunteers, and activists who travelled through Nablus over several years. Through personal encounters, he has managed to elicit empathy for the profound injustices suffered by Palestinians.

Two months before 7 October, Ahmed had found informal employment in an Israeli restaurant. After losing his job due to the border closure he decided he could no longer stay and began to implement his long-held plan to leave. Thanks to the growing sense of solidarity with Palestine that he helped to build, Ahmed was able to receive support for his migration project. He organised a fundraising campaign through GoFundMe, with the aim of raising \$7,400 "to leave Palestine (travel and visa) with a little support for my family." The campaign was led by a friend from the US who had recently returned after attending graduate school in the Middle East, as Palestine is not on the list of 19 countries where the platform can be used (Toper 2024). Despite increasing physical and digital restrictions on the flow of money to the occupied territories, Ahmed eventually managed to raise the necessary funds, which, combined with his personal and family savings, allowed him to plan his departure, following in the footsteps of a friend. After 7 October, Ahmed, who had only ever travelled to Turkey before, decided to embark on an "exploratory" trip to Europe with a tourist visa to see what opportunities there might be, although he was more drawn to North America. Reflecting on his experience upon his return, he said:

It has been the most wonderful experience for me. It's incredible to see how people live outside Palestine. I realised that people in Palestine do not have their rights. When I arrived here, I felt depressed because people back home have seen nothing of life. They have no basic rights. I tried to apply for a visa to America, but they have a full schedule until next March. I'm mainly thinking about America because I have many Palestinian friends and connections there, both American and Palestinian. I don't have a concrete plan yet, but Mohamed, who left for America three days ago, keeps in touch, and if everything is fine, I will go to Washington, DC, where Mohamed is based. (video interview with Ahmed, 20-07-2024)

Much like Ahmed, Salim, a 29-year-old from the Askar refugee camp in Nablus, built numerous international connections, particularly with Spanish volunteers and friends he met through local NGOs and associations. However, for him the turning point in finding an escape route was building solidarity with Palestine through digital tools by starting a fundraising campaign with the help of a

French friend he had met a few years before. Together, they had only managed to raise \$1,700. That is when Salim made a life-changing decision, opting to spend \$30 on an online financial advertisement to promote his campaign in Barcelona and Madrid, which allowed it to be seen by a German woman who has a militant background and lives in Catalonia. She donated money, got in touch with him and they developed a strong relationship on Instagram. She supported his campaign and even took out a bank loan to give him the amount needed as a guarantee to obtain a tourist visa from the Spanish consulate. Salim went to a restaurant in Nablus, where he had worked ten years earlier, and secured a work contract. With this, they prepared his invitation letter and motivation letter, which led to the visa being accepted. The woman then gave him some information on how to apply for asylum upon arrival and hosted him at her home. “She helped me more than my international friends from many years ago...” Salim remarked.

As these examples show, the relationships my interlocutors in Nablus have built over the years have been instrumental in (re)igniting a sense of solidarity with Palestine and translating it into tangible support for Palestinian mobility. This period of international solidarity has the potential to challenge the racial and colonial hierarchies embedded within the mobility regimes which govern and restrict Palestinian mobility, influencing people’s ability to exert varying degrees of control over their movements. It may also enable mobile subjects to shift their legal and social status during their journeys.

Hamza: “Travelling for Dignity”

“Travelling for Dignity” is the title Hamza has chosen for his upcoming book, in which he aims to explore and share with his Palestinian and international networks the decision-making process that led him to leave his homeland of Palestine, where he had lived for nearly sixty years. When Hamza informed me of his departure from Nablus to Europe, I was immediately struck by the unique evolution of his migratory journey and the shifting significance he attributed to it in relation to his changing social status. I followed his journey with keen interest, meeting him at various stages and locations, and under different circumstances. Born in 1964, Hamza has been an engineer and owned a hostel since 2016. His hostel, which is located in the old city of Nablus, was one of the first and few to operate in the area. Although he had never been away from the city for an extended period of time, his work in tourism had sparked his imagination and aspirations, fuelled by the international guests who stayed at his hostel. As he said to me during an interview:

Since opening my hostel in August 2016, I have hosted thousands of Europeans and guests from all over the world. One question that I am frequently asked by new guests is, “Have you been to my country?” My response is usually, “No, I’m sorry. At the moment, I’m hosting the world—the world is coming to visit me. Maybe, *inshallah*, I will travel the world later.” Now, that wish is beginning to come true. I am finally visiting the world, and more specifically, the cities where I have made friends. I will be visiting them soon. (interview with Hamza, 18-01-2024)

While the economic and political crises in the West Bank have increased his urgency to leave, Hamza’s reasons for travelling were deeply rooted in a long-lasting sense of multidimensional

maladjustment. This feeling was a combination of his yearning to explore the world beyond Nablus and choices which he perceived and experienced as forced adaptations to historical and political circumstances:

I applied for a Schengen visa in my city, so that I could start travelling, mainly due to the ongoing war in Gaza, which is severely affecting all of Palestine. The economy has come to a standstill and my business has suffered greatly. No visitors or guests are coming to stay at my hostel. Rather than remaining idle, I decided to start travelling.

Until now, we in the West Bank have been living in fear, as we know that after Gaza, the West Bank could be the next target. The settlers constantly pressure the government to annex the entire West Bank to Israel. This is something I even heard mentioned during the recent U.S. elections, when it was suggested that Trump might use this issue to gain support from the Zionist lobby in the U.S.

My concerns began before the 7th of October and they intensified as military groups started to form in parts of the West Bank, such as *'Arin al-Usud* in Nablus, as well as in Tulkarem and Jenin. The Israeli army began invading the old cities and refugee camps daily. During one of these invasions, I was attacked, and my life nearly ended when they shot at the windows of my hostel. From that moment, I decided I needed to find a way to start travelling. (online interview with Hamza 13-12-2023)

Starting from these premises, Hamza summarised how various aspects of his social life had deteriorated in the previous months. He explained that this had led to connections with his family and with his work in Palestine being severed. Hamza framed this multidimensional disconnection, coupled with the worsening of socio-economic conditions in the West Bank, as a loss of personal dignity. This profound sense of loss ultimately convinced him to pursue the desire to travel which he had been nurturing during his years working in hospitality:

I created a group called “Hamza Travelling to Europe” and added hundreds of my European friends who had previously visited my hostel. Through this group, I’ve been keeping them updated on my travels around Europe and explaining why I’m on this journey. The main reason I’m travelling now is to seek a place where I can regain my dignity. In my country, dignity has been lost over the past few years; it’s simply nonexistent. I’ll delve into this more in my book, in which you’ll find many details about this struggle. Under occupation, there is no dignity. In recent years, I have also faced other challenges, including corruption within PA officials and personal issues with my own family. (interview with Hamza 18-01-2024)

The information Hamza gathered by leveraging his social capital—friends and international contacts built over the years—along with the economic and symbolic capital he had accumulated and his age, enabled him to obtain a tourist visa from the Spanish consulate and plan a trip to Europe that was halfway between a holiday and an escape. His plan to leave was more like that of a tourist who was finally able to visit the people who had stayed at his hostel and with whom he had stayed in touch over the years. During his stay with me, he said:

I considered travelling to the U.S., Russia or Turkey but, after speaking with friends there, I decided Europe was a better choice. When I applied for my visa, I thought the process would be complicated and doubted whether I would be granted one. Surprisingly, just ten days later, the Spanish authorities approved a 90-day visa valid from the day I would enter Spain. Without hesitation, I booked a flight to

embark on this new adventure and challenge. This is my first time travelling for an extended period of time and being away from my country for so long.

I brought along a long list of contacts—hundreds of names of friends in Europe, though not all of them. I started reaching out to ask if they were available to host me, as sometimes people are busy with their work or travel. It's quite fun and interesting to plan my next move this way, though sometimes transportation can be expensive. However, when I balance the cost of travelling by staying with friends instead of paying for hotels, at least most of the time, it works out quite well. (online interview with Hamza 18-01-2024)

After landing in Europe, he had identified three key “targets” which he deemed essential for restoring his personal dignity. As he was determined not to overstay irregularly, these goals were the necessary conditions for moving beyond the status of “tourist” and embarking on a path towards stable settlement in Europe:

My targets for this journey can be summed up in three words. First, I aim to obtain the necessary papers, whether that means citizenship or a permit that allows me to settle long-term. Second, I want to find a job—though it doesn't necessarily have to be as an engineer, like I was in my country. I'm open to working in a hostel or a restaurant, as I'm a good chef, especially when it comes to Palestinian cuisine. Alternatively, I might consider becoming a freelancer or starting my own business, but I'll need to learn the rules and regulations of each country first. The third goal is to find a wife, as I am currently single. I understand that in European culture, relationships don't begin with the idea of marriage. Instead, they start with friendship, which can evolve into a close friendship, then a relationship, and eventually, if we're compatible, marriage. So, this is my main target. (interview with Hamza, 18-01-2024)

A few days before his visa expired, Hamza had not achieved any of the three “targets” he had set for himself—obtaining papers, finding work, or getting married. After discussions with many of his contacts, he decided to apply for asylum in Germany, despite the Dublin Regulation and the principle whereby one should seek asylum in the first country of arrival, which in his case was Spain. This decision marked the end of his time travelling around Europe and was made after carefully weighing his options – returning home or staying in a European country:

I had initially planned to visit my friends in Europe as a tourist. At that time, I hadn't decided on anything beyond travelling. If the situation in my country had calmed down, I sure would have returned. But after three months, as I followed the news, I saw that the situation was escalating and becoming even more dangerous. So, I asked myself: “why go back when the situation is still so dire?” That's when I changed my mind and decided not to return but to apply for asylum, as I couldn't find any other solution.

I also have great respect for the culture here. During my time as a hostel host, I welcomed hundreds of Germans, so I was already familiar with their hospitality. Before applying for asylum, I spent 38 days travelling across Germany, visiting friends and staying with German families. Throughout this time, I felt truly welcomed, and they showed a deep understanding of the difficult situation in my country. (video interview with Hamza, 17-06-2024)

Hamza was subsequently provided with accommodation in an asylum seeker facility near Nuremberg, where he is still awaiting the outcome of his application. Unlike Salim and other Palestinians who tend to use tourist visas to seek asylum in Europe, Hamza's decision developed during his experience

as a traveller in search of opportunities and access to a dignified life. His desire to travel became intertwined with the political and socio-economic circumstances that compelled him, like many other West Bank Palestinians, to expedite their plans to leave.

Conclusion

The events following 7 October marked a watershed moment in the life trajectories of all Palestinians living in Israel/Palestine, yet the impact varied significantly based on their legal status. While the genocidal violence in Gaza has dominated global headlines, the deep political and economic crises unfolding in the West Bank and their profound consequences on mobility, have received far less attention. This study has focused primarily on the mobility processes triggered among the middle class men in Nablus, examining their attitudes, aspirations, and ways of adapting to the various mobility regimes they encountered while attempting to find escape routes. Only those with adequate financial resources, employment, means, cultural, social, and networking capital manage to leave the West Bank through the limited number of regular channels they can access.

Beyond legal barriers, the practical challenges of moving beyond Palestine are related to the network of checkpoints, roadblocks, insufficient infrastructure available to Palestinians, and the challenges people face when attempting to cross the Allenby Bridge, all of which link control and limitations on internal mobility to the broader challenges of emigration. In addition to the constraints imposed by the Israeli mobility regime, which employs juridical, military, and architectural tools, Palestinians seeking to reach Europe are also confronted with the restrictive border policies imposed by Schengen visa regulations on travellers from the Global South, making access to regular mobility far more selective.

This article has highlighted a crucial element in challenging and circumventing mobility regimes: the ability to build networks and alliances, and to convert social and symbolic capital into tangible support for mobility. Transnational solidarity in response to the genocidal violence experienced by Palestinians thus can serve to facilitate their plans to leave the Palestinian-Israeli space, by navigating through restrictive mobility regimes. Solidarity networks play a crucial role, not only in securing letters of invitation but also in raising funds to cover the costs of visas and travel expenses. Using online crowdfunding platforms is an effective method for financing these journeys, as it turns international solidarity with Palestine into support for individuals, as demonstrated by Salim and Ahmed's stories. Success in fundraising depends on the groundwork, which consists of building connections and "bridges" in the preceding years as well as possessing language and social skills.

After gaining access to Europe through a tourist visa, Palestinians who managed to escape must decide whether to stay (Hamza and Salim), return (Majdi) or move on to other destinations (Ahmed). Whether they left as tourists, to "take a breath" of fresh air, or with the intention of seeking asylum in Europe, travelling abroad was seen as a form of adaptation to living conditions which were no longer deemed sustainable or suitable for a dignified life, based on the standards shared by middle-class Palestinians living in Nablus who can speak a European language or aspire to move abroad. Even within a context of structural violence, migration was not solely driven by the intensification of

settler-colonialism; the deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions also rekindled suppressed desires to travel to Europe. This provided new motivations to overcome emotional, economic, and familial ties in order to travel, while sparking ethical dilemmas and internal conflicts, in a context where emigration is often perceived as a form of surrender.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to all my Palestinian interlocutors and friends who made this research possible, sharing their thoughts and their impressions with me during such a painful and tragic moment. I'll always carry with me the many lessons I've learned from Palestine and the Palestinians. Their spirit of resistance continues to inspire me every day. I'd also like to thank Luca Queirolo Palmas, Enrico Fravega, Rassa Ghaffari, Livio Amigoni, Dorian Jano, Valeria Garrè, Federico Rahola, Massimo Cannarella, Luca Giliberti, and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and feedback on the paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interests was reported by the author.

Research ethics and consent

The participants in this research provided their consent for the anonymous publication of their interviews. Prior to publication, each participant had the opportunity to review the content of the article and confirm that it accurately reflected their responses. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, their names and any identifying information have been altered or removed.

Final Statement

This article is part of an ERC Advanced Grant (ERC, SOLROUTES, 101053836). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily those of the European Union or European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Notes

1. Many of my West Bank interlocutors refer to Palestinian citizens of Israel as “1948 Palestinians” or “Palestinians of the inside”, while some Israelis refer to them as “Arabs” in an implicit attempt to deny their specific national identity.
2. The Israeli authorities issue different ID cards to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, and Israel. Although all cards are essentially off-white, the distinguishing feature is the colour of the plastic case they must be carried in. Following the Oslo Accords, Palestinian residents in the occupied territories were given green cases, marked with Arabic script and the PA insignia (see Tawil-Souri, 2012).
3. The symbol shared across generations and countries by the Palestinian refugee population is the key to their destroyed homes from the *Nakba*. This key powerfully represents their enduring connection to the homeland and serves as a reminder of their right to return.
4. Many residents of Nablus ironically point out that the Tomb of Patriarch Joseph is, in fact, the burial site of a local *Sheikh*. It has only recently been venerated by Israeli settlers as a means of asserting an ancestral connection and a Jewish claim to the city.
5. Under the Oslo Accords, Israel is responsible for controlling and transferring Public Administration revenue on a monthly basis.
6. The names of all the interlocutors have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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Figures’ captions and sources

Figure 1. A mural in the old city of Nablus. Source: author’s photo. **Alt text:** Photograph of a mural in the old city of Nablus depicting a man waving a large Palestinian flag. Below the figure, the phrase “Resist to Exist” is displayed in both English and Arabic, emphasizing resilience and steadfastness.



Figure 2. System of mobility control in the northern West Bank. Source: <https://www.ochaopt.org/atlas2019/wbclosure.html>. **Alt text:** A detailed political map of the northern West Bank showing the locations of Palestinian cities, Israeli settlements, checkpoints, barriers, closed and restricted areas, and roads. The map uses three distinct colors to highlight the division of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C.

