

The Coercive Control of Israeli Settler Colonialism

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Coercive control, a framework originally conceptualized in Evan Stark's *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Everyday Life* and widely utilized in domestic violence theory, is one that can be expanded to understand the tactics and underlying values of all forms of authoritarian control. I have argued for this in other essays and have alluded to how an understanding of domestic violence can sharpen one's political analysis of authoritarianism in other forms. In this essay, I will demonstrate just how such an analysis can be applied to better understand the tactics and motivations of a genocidal apartheid state: Israel.

Physical and Sexual Violence

At time of writing, more than 35,000 Palestinians have been murdered in Israel's most recent genocidal push to ethnically cleanse, destroy, and occupy Gaza. 75,000 tons of explosives were dropped on the Gaza Strip in the first 200 days of war. Even before October of 2023, the status quo of Israeli apartheid required daily acts of violent physical force and sexual violence to maintain the subordinate status of Palestinians. Extrajudicial beatings and killings of Palestinians by Israeli citizens as well as the police and military has been the norm for the entire history of Israel's occupation. The IDF has been officially authorized to shoot stone throwers — many of whom are children — since 2021, even when they are fleeing. Out of every five Palestinians, one has been charged and imprisoned by the state of Israel and in prison they face daily extremes of sexual and physical violence.

The Duluth Model of domestic violence connects the use of physical and sexual violence to a broader context of coercive control. Violence from an abuser is not an expression of individual pathology, nor can the use of violence be understood when divorced from the context and manner in which it is used. Violence, rather than individual and episodic, is intimately connected to other social factors that determine both its use and its ability to bring about the subordination of its target(s). In the case of domestic violence, the very possibility of physical and sexual violence — even when it is not actively being used, or is used only on very rare occasions — highly incentivizes submission to the other tactics of coercive control. A boyfriend who has gotten violent once can always become violent again, and the implicit threat of that violence in *all* of his interactions with his victim informs how that victim will respond to other, less obvious or overt forms of coercion.

Settler-colonial violence *is* coercive control, and it functions accordingly. Every other tactic that Israel deploys, which we will further examine here, gains its meaning and power from Israel's ability and willingness to unleash genocidal violence. The victims of coercive control, Palestinians, have no corresponding capacity to enact the same kind of physical or sexual violence on Israeli settlers, and individual instances of physical or sexual violence enacted by Palestinians on Israelis cannot diminish the reality of this context. Just as domestic abusers do, Israel tries to shine a spotlight on any morally questionable acts of violence enacted by individual victims in order to obscure the acting power relation. One need not be distracted by litigating the ethics of individual acts of survivor resistance, as they do not alter the power relations that ultimately give that violence its meaning. Regardless of the character or nature of Palestinian resistance (which itself is not a monolith but a multiplicity), it does not and *cannot* function in the way that the violence enacted by the Israeli state does upon Palestinians.

Intimidation

Tactics of intimidation in all forms of coercive control leverage the implicit threat of escalation and invokes a history of violence — one that the victims are intimately familiar with, even if outside observers are not — to gain or maintain control. An abuser’s subtle and sharp look amongst company is rightfully interpreted by the victim as a threat and thus a continuation of the abuse, even if the bystanders miss this meaning and interpret the exchange differently (as they often do.) The abuser might lock or block doors to indicate that escalation of the abuse is imminent, or at the very least *could be* imminent if the victim doesn’t submit to their whims to their satisfaction. They hold pets, children, or even other family members or friends hostage in order to frighten their victims and disincentivize resistance to their control. The point of invoking terror in victims of domination is not merely instrumental. The practice of domination serves to reify the power relation itself, and this is why abusers will continue to terrorize victims who attempt to submit entirely (or as much as is possible) to their demands.

Well before Israel began the ethnic cleansing campaign that many Palestinians are referring to as the Second Nakba in October of 2023, Palestinians have had to live their lives under constant threat and intimidation. Just as with domestic violence, the coercive control of authoritarianism is a context rather than an episodic event, and for the victims that context proliferates into all aspects of social life. A culture of apartheid is itself a constant threat of genocide and extermination. Entire road systems are barred to Palestinians, but all road systems, including within the West Bank and Gaza, are free for Israeli settlers to travel. Israel erects tall border walls and heavily armed checkpoints that Palestinians cannot pass — or else pass with extreme difficulty and constant danger — while Israelis are encouraged to travel and settle on any side of these barriers.

Israel’s military drones, called *zanana* by Palestinians for their loud and disruptive buzzing sound, have been a more or less omnipresent feature in the skies of Palestine since 2000, and have increased to a roar in recent months. Their mere presence in the skies is an act of terror, meant to disrupt the sleep, education, and daily lives of Palestinians while also acting as a constant threat of violent escalation. Shahd Safi, a Palestinian in the Gaza Strip writes of the drones: “Unlike war planes that loudly announce themselves, when a drone strikes, you don’t know it’s coming. Suddenly something — it could be you — explodes. Sometimes they look like slow-flying birds. You wish they were birds. Even the most dangerous birds are more merciful.”

As previously mentioned, the tactics of coercive control aren’t always obviously instrumental, even when the abuser tries to craft a narrative that makes it appear that way. Often the very act of making a threat that the abuser knows the victim cannot avoid is an end in itself, as it can affirm the existing power relation and validate the abuser to themselves and to their supporters. An example to illustrate: after an assault on Rafah on April 21st 2024 that left twenty-two people dead, eighteen of them children, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to “deliver additional and painful blows” on Palestinians, supposedly to “secure the release of hostages” from Hamas.

This threat is made within a specific context, and is also made to obscure that context and the fundamental power relation it reveals. It is always to an abuser’s advantage to flatten the power dynamics and make it look as though the conflict is about either “mutual toxicity” or otherwise leverage DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) to frame themselves as the real victim of their survivors’ attempts to challenge their control and take back their autonomy. If Israel’s numbers are to be believed then there are approximately 130 Israeli hostages being held in

Gaza. Israel, on the other hand, holds about 9,500 Palestinians hostage in 19 prisons within Israel and one in the occupied West Bank. Israeli hostages were taken in an act of violent resistance by an oppressed people subjected to apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and the ongoing theft of their homeland. Palestinian hostages have been taken on a regular basis for as long as Israel has existed, for passing through checkpoints, for trying to reach their own farmlands, for tossing rocks at passing military vehicles or border walls, and for merely existing as Palestinians. One in every five Palestinians have been arrested and charged by Israel at one point in their lives, and that number doubles for Palestinian men, two in every five. Palestinians, nor any political group within Palestine, has the capacity nor infrastructure to mass incarcerate Israelis in the same way or the same degree.

Beyond this, it is clear from the quality of Israel's violence that their hostages are of relatively little concern. You do not level city blocks you think hostages might be being kept if you are primarily interested in having them returned alive. Further, launching a military strike that kills four adults and eighteen children is demonstrably not an attack on a "military compound" as Israel loves to claim. If Israeli hostages are indeed still alive and being held in Gaza, a vast majority of the people fleeing Israel's ethnic cleansing campaign can do nothing about it. The apparent content of the threat "give us our hostages or we'll keep bombing you" is for an external audience, not for Palestinians. It is meant to exaggerate the power of Israel's victims and obscure Israel's power location as a settler-colonial project enacting a genocide on a captive refugee population, to give observers an excuse to look away. The threat — as it is accurately interpreted by Palestinians ("submit to our colonial project or we'll keep wiping out your children") — as well as the observer's choice to accept the apologia as truth or simply as an excuse for disengagement serves to affirm the existing power relation, even as those who give the threat are well aware their conditions will not or cannot be met. It is to affirm Palestinians as inherently dangerous, untrustworthy, or simply "bringing it on themselves" by not adequately submitting to impossible demands.

Surveillance

Surveillance, too, has an obvious and directly instrumental purpose that also serves to affirm the existing power relation in everyday life. The abuser might resort to a range of different surveillance strategies: they might physically stalk their victim, track them with GPS, read through their texts or emails, not allow their victim to talk with other people without the abuser present, and more. Surveillance is about control and is itself a threat of violence. Its most obvious purpose is to keep tabs on the victim's activity, but less obvious is how surveillance functions by expanding the sense of the abuser's power and control beyond what is even possible for them to logistically maintain. The abuser can technically put video cameras on every corner of the house and force access to their victim's communications but, like with all surveillance, the sheer amount of data to comb through in order to catch every supposed transgression can quickly outstrip the capacity of even the most dedicated abusers. However, the knowledge that there are video cameras on every corner of the house and that the abuser can access their correspondence at any time serves as a suppressive force for the victim(s) at *all times* because even if the abuser might not catch it or is unlikely to catch it, there is always the risk that they could.

On May 2, 2024, Amnesty International released a report, *Automated Apartheid*, that details the rapidly expanding surveillance system that is deployed against Palestinians. Since 2020, Israeli soldiers have been incentivized to take photos of Palestinians with the Blue Wolf app that runs those photos through the Wolf Pack database where they collect all known information on Palestinians, including where they live and who their family members are. The process is gamified, ranking military units by the number of pictures they take with prizes offered to the high-ranking units. According to the report, Israel has mobilized a new facial recognition surveillance program — Red Wolf — at some of their checkpoints:

“When a Palestinian goes through a checkpoint where Red Wolf is operating, their face is scanned, without their knowledge or consent, and compared with biometric entries in databases which exclusively contain information about Palestinians. Red Wolf uses this data to determine whether an individual can pass a checkpoint, and automatically biometrically enrolls any new face it scans. If no entry exists for an individual, they will be denied passage.”

Skies filled with drones that could be armed for surveillance or armed to kill. Surveillance cameras installed to constantly watch Palestinian neighborhoods. Routine practices of collecting the image of every Palestinian who passes through a checkpoint or otherwise comes into contact with an Israeli soldier. The effect cannot help but be suppressive, not just to the activities of active resistance, but the activities of everyday life. Speaking to Al Jazeera, Abukhater, a Palestinian living in occupied East Jerusalem describes the effect of the surveillance: “People feel this chilling effect, where they do not socialize or move as freely as they would — they do not live normally as they would.”

As with the other tactics we have explored, Palestinians have no corresponding capacity to erect and run an equivalent structure to surveil Israel or Israeli settlers, nor act upon the information they gather in the same way even if they could. The very ability to conduct such intensive and encompassing surveillance requires a hierarchical power relation where the surveiller has the resources to put a surveillance structure into place and the power to force the victims to submit to that structure.

Emotional Abuse

The various strategies of emotional abuse are often where the importance of affirming a power relation within coercive control can become the most apparent, even as the emotional abuse itself can be the easiest for the abuser to deny or obscure. Abusers belittle and undermine their victims. They humiliate them in front of others (overtly and covertly.) They deny their victim’s sense of their own identity or use that identity to devalue them further. They gaslight their victims in order to get them to doubt their own sense of reality. Sometimes the emotional abuse has an apparently instrumental character that the abuser might hide behind — “I wouldn’t call you that if you didn’t...” — but when the mask well and truly slips it becomes apparent that degrading someone’s sense of personal dignity is an end in itself when you are working to create and maintain a context of coercive control. It is a performance that seeks to affirm (to the victim themselves, the abuser, and bystanders) the victim as someone unworthy of dignity, untrustworthy with their own agency, and ultimately a person who it is justifiable to control. It is also intended to validate

the abuser as someone who is competent, powerful, and authoritative. Emotional abuse is a key tactic to shaping the terrain of social values: how the victim is seen by others as well as how they see themselves in relation to power.

Gaslighting is a key strategy for Israel in its emotional abuse of Palestinians. The very project of Israel itself is dependent on denying the Indigeneity of Palestinians to the land. Zionist academics have been hard at work for the totality of the Israel state project to position Israeli settlers as the “real” Indigenous people to the land, and Palestinians as a historically non-existent, non-people, even as they move into homes and demolish villages that have existed long before the state of Israel has. In denying and working to erase the Indigeneity of Palestinians, Israel can then easily deny that settler colonialism is even happening at all. Just as the domestic abuser does, Israel works to control the narrative in such a way that conceptualizing its victims as *victims* becomes difficult or impossible.

In gaslighting and denying Palestinians’ status as Indigenous people who were living on the land well before Zionists began dispossessing them of it, Israel routinely mobilizes Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism. The Zionist narrative varies, but generally frames the land before Israel as empty and Palestinians as nonexistent. To explain, or at least fit into their narrative, the obvious presence of millions of Palestinians on the land, they frequently resort to racist and Orientalist notions of “invasion” or “infestation.” On October 9th, 2023 Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant referred to Palestinians as “human animals.” In August of the same year, Israel’s Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir declared “My right, my wife’s, my children’s, to roam the roads of Judea and Samaria are more important than the right of movement of the Arabs.” Examples that reveal how important mobilizing racism is in the project of dispossessing Indigenous people of their land.

Another predominant tactic of emotional abuse inflicted upon Palestinians by Israel is that of humiliation. Israeli soldiers regularly strip Palestinians of their clothes (sexual violence and humiliation tactics so often go hand in hand) and parade them publicly. Strip searching Palestinians in prisons is ubiquitous; 69% of Palestinian children in prison have been strip searched. Israeli soldiers routinely gun down Palestinians and then block access to their bodies to allow them to be further degraded by the elements or animals. Hundreds of Palestinians whose bodies have been stolen, going back to the first Nakba, lie in mass graves called “cemeteries of numbers” across Israel, and there are over a hundred murdered Palestinians whose bodies are being held hostage from their families in refrigerators at the Abu Kabir Forensic Institute near Tel Aviv.

The rituals of humiliation against Palestinians are not limited to the actions of the Israeli military. Because coercive control is a context, informed and made possible by the dominant social conditions, it is unfortunately extremely common for bystanders to the abuse — especially if its legitimacy is being challenged — to join in on humiliating victims of abuse, even when the reason for their investment is not immediately apparent. If coercive control is a *feature* of the status quo, rather than an aberration, then far more people are implicated in the maintenance of that control than just the individual(s) who is directly wielding that violence. When a threat to the status quo of coercive control is noticed, those who are implicated (no matter to what degree) react to protect their own social position and work to naturalize the existing power relation. Israeli social media proliferates with videos of Israeli citizens donning brown face, cheering on IDF war crimes, and making fun of the suffering of Palestinians. Their stake and involvement as settlers in justifying this project of genocide cannot be clearer. Their participation in the emotional abuse of Palestinians cannot be meaningfully separated from the more direct humiliations enacted by

soldiers. Together, they construct a series of compounding social practices and narratives that dehumanize their victims while justifying the violence of settler colonialism: a violence *all* settlers depend on to maintain their social positions.

Regardless of the veracity of claims about individual instances of extremes of violence or humiliation enacted on Israelis by Palestinians, in the context of coercive control that is settler colonialism, Palestinians as a group have no corresponding capacity to visit the same kind of daily humiliations on Israelis that are brought down upon them. The weight of moral injury from tactics of humiliation is determined by the dynamics of power. Humiliation gains resonance for victim *and* perpetrator because of the relation of disempowerment that limits or entirely bars off the victim's ability to defend and reassert their dignity and personal agency.

Isolation

Isolating a victim is imperative for the success of coercive control. Tactics of isolation can vary greatly. Some abusers directly order a victim not to speak with friends or family, others will work to more covertly sabotage their victim's other relationships to achieve the same result. Still others might achieve the functional isolation of their victim by becoming close with the people their victim might otherwise disclose to or seek support from. An abuser might undermine their victim's other interests, get them fired from their job, or pressure them to quit school in order to preemptively cut off other forms of connection. Isolation, regardless of its form, is such an important goal for abusers because substantive social support is one of the most powerful tools a victim can have against abuse. Substantive social support can denaturalize the values and destabilize the narrative of the abuser and provide the material support the victim needs to resist or otherwise escape the abuse.

Isolation has been an absolutely central tactic for the Israeli project of settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing. These tactics include the partition of Palestine into separate territories, militarized checkpoints, attacks on communication infrastructure, and more. Travel between the West Bank and Gaza Strip for Palestinians is barred without special permission that is near impossible to acquire. So, too, are the numerous blockades and checkpoints only Palestinians must pass through: in early 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs found 565 movement obstacles in the West Bank alone. Keeping victims separate from one another, in smaller, more easily controlled enclaves is a tactic intended to undermine their capacity to resist control.

Keeping victims from external support is just as imperative to achieving coercive control as keeping them from finding and supporting each other. Early in October of 2023, Israel shut off the Gaza Strip's access to electricity, food, water, and fuel and on October 11th Gaza's last power station ran out of fuel, making it exceedingly difficult for Palestinians in Gaza to communicate with one another and the rest of the world. The Committee for Protecting Journalists has found that at least 105 journalists have been killed by Israel between October 3, 2023 and May 22, 2024, making this the deadliest period for journalists since the CPJ started collecting data in 1992. In 2022, Defense for Children International reported to the U.S. State Department that a 13 year old Palestinian boy was raped in an Israeli prison and the very next day Israeli forces raided the Defense for Children International office in the West Bank, removed their computers, and declared them a terrorist entity.

Palestinians, nor any political group within Palestine, possesses an equivalent ability to isolate Israel or Israeli colonizers. Most Israeli settlers live behind layers of militarized borders, and, unlike Palestinians, are at liberty to cross these borders more or less at their choosing. The colonizers who make up the first waves of settler expansion into the occupied territories beyond these borders are accompanied and supported by Israel's military. Even the most violent attacks on Israelis never leave the effected settlers bereft of resources and support.

Economic Control

That social support and solidarity is so imperative to create opportunities for resistance to coercive control reveals the central importance that economic control plays in maintaining it. Social support and external connection are paths by which the necessary things for life can flow, thus undermining the authoritarian power of the abuser. Much of entrapment is made possible by the abuser's ability to leverage aspects of their victim's material precarity to their own advantage. Prohibitively expensive housing, medical care, basic utilities, transportation, childcare, etc. are all barriers that help keep untold victims entrapped by their abuser. Some abusers will do things to intentionally increase their victim's precarity and dependence on them, like stealing and spending their money or getting them fired from their job. Capturing total control over the things the victim needs to live serves as an extreme disincentive to resistance and can even reduce their physical capacity to do so.

Israel has repeatedly blocked necessary aid and resources from reaching Palestinians in order to advance their genocidal project and expand their control. The Gaza Strip has been under blockade for 16 years, and the most recent Israel-imposed blackout and ceaseless bombing campaign has absolutely decimated the already precarious infrastructure of the Gaza Strip. Hospitals, even before they are intentionally leveled by the Israeli military, do not have the resources to function. Children in the Gaza Strip are currently intaking only 10% of their normal water use. On May 14, 2024, a group of Israeli protestors in the West Bank blocked aid trucks intended for Gaza and destroyed their contents. On May 21st, The Guardian reported that members of the Israeli military forces have been in communication with these protest groups, informing them of when and where aid trucks can be intercepted and attacked. Showing us clearly, again, how complicity in maintaining a context of coercive control is more widely shared than is generally recognized.

Just as an abuser will attack or destroy what resources they are unable to coopt or bar access to, so has Israel on the natural resources of Palestinians. A potent example (but one of many) has been the systematic destruction of olive groves by Israeli settlers. Olive trees and tending to them has long been a fundamental component of Palestinian cultural identity, providing a source of sustenance, income, and community connection. Destroying any olive groves that cannot be easily appropriated by settlers has been a consistent practice of Israeli colonialism since 1967. Since then, more than 800,000 Palestinian olive trees have been uprooted or burned. Violence against both olive groves and the Palestinians who tend them spikes every harvest season, which typically occurs through October and November. After October 3, 2023, Israelis entirely barred Palestinians from traveling to their groves at all. Settlers left leaflets on the groves that read: "You have reached the border! Entry is forbidden and dangerous, and anyone who approaches will see burning trees."

Palestinians cannot impose the same economic control over Israeli settlers that is imposed on them. They cannot turn off Israel's access to food, water, or electricity. They cannot methodically bomb each of Israel's hospitals out of existence, nor can they erect a blockade through which no one and no aid can pass. Even the most extreme and violent disruptions Palestinians are capable of visiting on Israeli infrastructure are episodic: that is, they are momentary acts of resistance that cannot, regardless of their content, establish an ongoing context of coercive control that proliferates the fabric of daily life for Israeli settlers.

Survivor Support Strategies Applied

That an analysis of coercive control can be applied to better understand a variety of situations — from the interpersonal violence of abuse to the genocidal violence of settler colonial projects — tells us a lot about the nature of power and domination, the ways they function, and the central logic of authoritarianism they act upon. So, too, does it reveal necessary methods of support and strategies to undermine any and all projects of coercive control.

Authoritarians of all kinds, on all scales, love to weaponize DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) and Israel seems to be trying to make an art of it. This is the reason that, in each category of analysis in this essay, I have made a point to clearly state that no Palestinians, nor any political group in Palestine, have a corresponding capacity to leverage the same tactics to the same effect. Abusers routinely try to bring attention to the individual actions — divorced from their context — of their victims that they believe will serve to discredit them and act as an excuse for disengagement for bystanders. Some abusers may outright lie, and some others may present a sliver of truth, decontextualized. For survivors and their accomplices, it is easy and understandable to get pulled into the weeds of litigating these events in order to defend the survivor's image or honor. However, doing so, more often than not, can pull us further into affirming aspects of the abusive logic by — if indirectly — insinuating that there are certain types of survivor resistance that can undo or erase the abusive power relation they are entrapped by. Regardless of what forms their resistance takes (and it takes as many forms as there are Palestinians), Palestinians are irrevocably the victims of Israel's coercive control. Keeping the realities of that power relation in focus is how the constant DARVO of Israel and its allies can be challenged. There is no form of resistance that Palestinians can offer, no individuals with reactionary beliefs Israel can point to, no political groups that can form among them that can dispossess Palestinians of our solidarity against the genocidal violence of Israel's settler colonialism.

The ways that coercive control is leveraged reveals its weaknesses. To enact systematic physical and sexual violence Israel relies heavily on its capacity to capture Palestinians and to drop endless bombs on their homes. This capacity relies on the infrastructure of the military industrial complex, which can and must be disrupted all over the world. Attacking their surveillance capacities demands the same thing. Israel uses intimidation tactics in order to devalue the lives of Palestinians and to obscure the dynamics of power, so it is up to us to continuously center the lives of Palestinians and to never stop shouting about Israel's location as a settler-colonial project. Emotional abuse against Palestinians includes gaslighting and denial of their identities as Indigenous people, and so we must tirelessly and *materially* affirm Land Back for Palestinians. When Israel works to isolate their victims, this is an indication that we should offer Palestinians all the social support and solidarity we can muster. They attack their victims' ability to access

necessary resources, and so we must find alternative paths to get them those resources by any means necessary. Because Israel resorts to using DARVO time and time again, it is all the more important that we loudly affirm Palestinians' social position as victims who need justice. That which authoritarians seek to control and suppress is that which they fear the most, and it is in these locations that expanding and protecting the autonomy of the victim is most vital.

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