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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INCENDIARY KITES AND BALLOONS: ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE IN PALESTINE'S GREAT MARCH OF RETURN

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the Palestinian use of incendiary kites and balloons that emerged during Gaza's Great March of Return. Kites and balloons are rarely thought of as unstoppable weapons in contemporary theatres of war and resistance. Yet, for an extended period the Israeli military was unable to halt these aerial explosives from burning large quantities of agricultural fields and natural forests surrounding the Gaza Strip. The article critiques the security literature that discusses this new method of Palestinian resistance as another instance of terrorism. Instead, by drawing on Palestinian and Fanonian theorisations of violence in anti-colonial movements, I attempt to make the kites and balloons legible as a form of indigenous resistance to settler colonialism that can be an internally mobilising tool for Palestinians. The paper argues that the low-tech aerial explosives were mobilised as a response to high-tech militarism and long-standing settler colonial processes still shaping dynamics on the ground. These innovative forms of resistance momentarily broke the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip and in burning trees planted to cover destroyed Palestinian villages open up questions surrounding the struggle over land in Israel/Palestine. The paper concludes by delineating how despite some immediate breakthroughs, it remains questionable whether these militant kites and balloons are long-term politically viable techniques of resistance.

KEYWORDS: anti-colonial resistance; Gaza Strip; Great March of Return; kites and balloons; settler colonialism.

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1. Introduction

The grassroots political mobilisation that emerged in the Gaza Strip, known as the Great March of Return (GMR), constitutes one of the largest Palestinian uprisings in recent history and has received significant media attention, mostly due to Israel's military repression. Since March 30 2018[1], Israel's military has killed 214 Palestinians and injured over 36,000 during the popular mobilisations that took place weekly until November 2019 (OCHA 2020). During the same period, a Palestinian fighter killed one Israeli soldier, while no Israeli civilian was killed. The Great March of Return organisers sought to avoid the use of violence and the protest was explicitly framed as a "peaceful" endeavour. The vast majority of participants assembled unarmed near the fence separating Gaza from Israel and protested nonviolently. Yet, after the first day of the GMR, other methods of resistance emerged. Activists began cutting and breaking into the fence enclosing the Gaza Strip, burning tyres, throwing rocks, and, most notably, flying incendiary devices. In particular, burning kites and balloons are the case study employed here to investigate a novel insurgent technique of resistance in Israel/Palestine.[2] Although the fires did not result in any fatality on the Israeli side, for an extended period the Israeli military was unable to stop the launching of incendiary objects, which caused by December 2018 more than 2,000 fires inside Israel setting ablaze almost 8,000 acres (over 35 square kilometres) of largely agricultural fields and natural forests (Rinat 2018).

In emphasising the historicity and specificity of the case, the article weaves through an analysis of indigenous resistance to settler colonialism. Scholars increasingly see Zionism as a European settler colonial movement, which "subjects Palestine and Palestinians to structural and violent forms of dispossession, land appropriation, and erasure in the pursuit of a new Jewish state and society" (Jabary Salamanca et al. 2012, 1). By upholding the notion of settler colonialism to understand the situation on the ground means "to historicize the colonisation of Palestine as a process that began long before the 1948 Nakba" (Bhandar and Ziadah 2016). This frame also turns the analysis away from the binary of "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," which is representative of a "Zionist hegemonic" narrative (de Jong 2017). The shifting of the perspective towards settler colonialism has been defined as a "settler colonial turn" (Busbridge 2017) in Palestine Studies, and has enabled a counter-interpretation of the temporal-spatial framework of the struggle. However, while the academic turn may have been recent there is a longer trajectory of Palestinian and other scholars adopting this frame (Sayegh 1965, Kanafani 1972, 36). While the mainstream framework of reference is played out solely in the lands Israel invaded in 1967 – what is known as the occupied Palestinian territories - settler colonialism allows for a broader analysis in terms of the temporal arc and in terms of the political implications of such an analysis. Yet, Barakat (2018) warns against using the settler colonial lens without situating Palestinians as active agents. As she suggests, we should centre indigenous voices and resistance, so that an indigenous reading of settler colonialism – one which does not necessarily overlap with the academic interpretations of it - is brought about (Ibid, 360). Lastly, there is a history of Palestinian literature specifically adopting a settler colonial frame while theorising anti-colonial resistance to Zionism and imperialism (Fateh 1967), which this paper will draw on.

[1] On this day Palestinians commemorate Land Day. See interview with activist-priest Fr. Shehadeh Shehadeh, who headed the first protest in 1976 (Adalah 2005).

[2] This was the first recorded systematic use of incendiary kites and balloons as a weapon in Israel/Palestine. For past comparative examples see the Fu-Go balloon bomb deployed by Japan against the United States during World War Two (Cohen 2014).

Recent scholarship analysed the Great March of Return from the organisers' perspective (Abusalim 2018) and focused on the class composition of the protesters (Baker 2019). Other studies analysed the protests' repression through Israel's sovereign "right to kill" (Erakat 2019), the "right to maim" (Puar and Abu Sitta 2019), and as an opportunity for high-tech innovation (Dana 2020). The majority of literature that covers in-depth the incendiary devices uncritically adopt Israel's dominant narrative and provides knowledge that justifies the use of state violence (Zych 2019; Khen 2019; Yarchi and Ayalon 2020). This narrative relies on what Edward Said (1978) termed Orientalist language, whereby Arab societies are portrayed as an "Oriental" race not equal to the West. In this way racialized language frames Palestinian resistance as "terrorism," therefore an illegitimate response. As Abdo shows, racist Orientalist ideology constructs "a new epistemology for perceiving the Middle Eastern people, the Muslim, the Arab and specially the Palestinian" (2014, 4) as inferior to Europeans and the West. Crucially, to use Gramscian language, this hegemonic narrative provides ahistorical depictions of anti-colonial struggles for liberation as "terrorism" to legitimate the repressive violence of the state.

There are some exceptions, however. Keysar (2020) briefly explores kites and balloons as "aerial resistance" within the context of do-it-yourself (DIY) techniques. Kamil (2019) provides extensive analysis of the use of incendiary kites and balloons. She is the only scholar to historicize this tactic as a form of low-tech weaponry within the history of warfare. This article builds on that scholarship but differs in a number of ways. Kamil analyses incendiary kites and balloons as media objects and examines their digital representations "within the context of technological development in Palestine and Israel" (2019, 137). Instead of focusing on the aspects of this form of resistance as media, this article centres on the motivations of Palestinians engaged in launching kites and balloons, which in Kamil are side-lined. Furthermore, it concentrates on their emergence as a resistance tactic within the Great March of Return movement and their material impact for Palestinians and the Israeli side.

The research question addressed here is: what explains the mobilisation of this particular type of resistance? The paper argues that incendiary kites and balloons are a response to settler colonial violence that can be liberating for the individual. After a brief history of the rise and repression of the Great March of Return (section 2), it attempts to theorise incendiary aerial devices building on Palestinian and Fanonian notions of anti-colonial resistance (section 3). Despite some of its limitations, the settler colonial violence/violent anti-colonial resistance dialectic can help understanding the appearance of these aerial explosives. Specifically, the way revolutionary violence can help "free Arab consciousness from the complex of deficiency" (Fateh 1967, 15) and reclaim humanity (Fanon 1965) is visible in the motivations for launching the incendiary devices (section 4). The innovation in mobilisations against high-tech militarism through the low-tech character of kites and balloons have permitted Palestinians to momentarily break the blockade (section 5). They have also for a short time made Israeli settlers pay a small price for occupying Palestinian land, and in burning trees planted to cover destroyed Palestinian villages that were depopulated in 1948 they revealed the ruins still present on the land (section 6). In the Conclusion, it is further elaborated on why it remains uncertain that incendiary kites and balloons can be a long-term viable technique of struggle. These innovative forms of resistance only posed a limited challenge since the vast military superiority of the opponent is very difficult to threaten and the Israeli state has compensated farmers for their losses (Heller 2018).

To address the research question, the analysis draws on the following methodological tools: a theoretical discussion to bring into conversation the use of incendiary devices with Palestinian notions of anti-colonial resistance as well as with the work of Fanon; a critique of existing academic literature on the use of kites and balloons during the protests; and testimonies of Palestinian protesters and information on the incendiary devices available in secondary sources. In May and October 2020 two extended semi-structured interviews

were conducted over the phone through WhatsApp with organisers of the GMR which provided information on the reasons and motivations for launching incendiary kites and balloons that further informed the analysis.[3]

Before proceeding a note is in order regarding the contradictory interpretations of what incendiary kites and balloons represent. Are the incendiary kites and balloons a form of violence or nonviolence? Brokhill and Cordell suggest violence remains a very contested concept in social science and situate the scholarly debate as revolving around "the question of whether the concept of violence should be defined narrowly, and limited to physical attack – violence as force, or whether it should be extended to a broader definition – violence as violation" (2019, 983). If we take the more conservative definition that narrowly defines violence equating it with force and "define the concept as the exercise of physical force" (Ibid), the incendiary kites and balloons can and have had that type of effect. In critical academic literature such as Kamil (2019, 137), they are identified as a form of violent resistance.

However, Palestinian views differ on the interpretation. While some Palestinians recognize that the use of incendiary devices can be a form of violence that causes suffering to the other side (see p.7), others maintain that their actions were "peaceful." From an interview with a GRM participant it emerged that some Palestinians want to distinguish between the violence of the Israeli state and their own responses, which, in their view, should not be appraised in the same terms.[4] The interviewee pointed to the importance of asserting that the kites and balloons' violence level is of a lesser form compared to that of rockets, for instance, and that they are not intended to kill people. Indeed, the fact no Israeli has been significantly injured or killed confirms the intention to not lethally target people. At the same time, others still recognize this type of resistance tries "to hurt or inconvenience Israel, however little" (Abu Eltarabesh 2021). A quote from a protester launching incendiary devices and claiming they are a peaceful tactic points to rather a deliberate calibration of violence that remains nonlethal, "Even if they cause damage to lands already taken by force from Palestinians, the kites are still a symbol of peace and freedom. At least they do not target or kill anyone and we are not aiming at this" (Husseini 2018). This framing is reminiscent of the African National Congress (ANC) sabotage campaign launched in the 1960s, where home-made bombs were deployed in deliberate non-lethal attacks against symbols of apartheid in South Africa (Stevens 2019, 240). By emphasising the existence of different types of political violence, this article suggests that without appraising this form of resistance with its violent ramifications misses a key element to explain the reasons for its mobilisation. While the reading I give of the incendiary kites and balloons builds on the narratives and motivations of protesters, it diverges from how some perceive this practice. In doing so, as Bargu describes in relation to a study on insurgent resistance to state violence, this divergence allows us "to analyse resistance beyond how that resistance presents itself to itself, to its supporters and opponents, and the public at large" (2014, 30).

[3] The analysis also draws on twenty-seven semi-structured interviews conducted between April and June 2018, collected with participants of the GRM, some of which were injured by the Israeli army. Some interviews were conducted in collaboration with researchers in Gaza, while others through Skype from London. It is quoted only one interview that discusses the reasons for launching kites and balloons, while the other interviews have provided valuable insight on the participants' experience of military violence during the protests. These interviews were submitted as evidence to the 2018 UN Commission of Inquiry into the protests.

[4] Interview, October 2020, WhatsApp.

2. A brief history of the rise and repression of the Great March of Return

Before turning to the role of incendiary kites and balloons, it is necessary to contextualize the ways in which the Great March of Return materialized. Abusalim (2018) argues that the 2011 revolutionary change that the Arab uprisings ignited was a major turning point in the consciousness of the GRM's organisers. He also suggests that many aspects of the regional uprisings inspired Palestinian mobilisation efforts. Another important driver for the mobilisation was the fact that the majority of Gaza's population consists of refugees whose dispossessed homes and lands are located inside Israel. The core of this movement can be described as the "Oslo generation." These are young people under the age of thirty who grew up in Gaza during the "Peace Process" years (post-1993). They never left the Strip because of the Israeli siege and have limited opportunities for a decent life. Alongside economic considerations, it is also important to note that after the 1993 Oslo Accords, Palestinian refugees' demands were marginalized in the political arena. In this regard, the main strategy of the GMR consisted in the construction of so-called Camps of Return: tents symbolising the displacement of the Palestinian nation since the creation of Israel in 1948. Thus, they also mobilised around the question of return, the idea of "marching" and the mobility of a people intent on reclaiming dispossessed homes and lands. The more mundane Palestinian resistance tactic known as *sumud* (staying put) here cannot seemingly serve the cause; rootedness is not the value that demands protection. This contextualisation helps situating the emergence of incendiary kites and balloons as a tactic integral to the demands of the GRM, which centred on the right of return and ending the siege.

To understand the emergence of this form of resistance is required to position it within the ongoing settler colonial violence imposed on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip before and during the Great March of Return. Similarly to other counter-revolutionary forces in the region operating since 2010, the Israeli state employed large-scale violence to repress GRM demonstrations. On the first day of the GRM, an estimated 30,000–45,000 people participated peacefully. On the same day, Israeli snipers shot dead 17 Palestinians and injured some 1,400 others. The repression was deployed through legal and discursive technologies to legitimate violence such as the "terrorist," "human shields" (Gordon and Perugini 2018), and the "infiltrator" threats, with which the Israeli state has historically criminalized refugees attempting to return to their lands and properties (Shalhub-Kevorkian 2016).

Further, in discussing the shoot-to-kill policy of the military during the protests, Erakat shows how the "securitization of Palestinian natives reflects a settler anxiety that has equated its settler sovereignty with a Jewish demographic balance and has driven a policy of racial purity" (2019, 795). In pointing to the racialization of Palestinians, Erakat also captures the refusal of the Israeli state to use assimilation policies as a settler colonial logic, thus exposing Israel's need to maintain natives in Gaza segregated and geographically contained. Strikingly, in the first nine months of the protests, over 80 percent of the 6,106 protesters wounded were shot in the lower limbs by Israeli soldiers (Akkad 2019). Building on Puar's work, we can assert that Palestinian protesters threatened the settler colonial order and therefore were regularly injured and maimed in what she terms "the sovereign right to maim" (2017), unsettling the binary between biopolitics and necropolitics, and exposing Israel's ongoing settler colonial violence. Without this scholarship situating Israeli colonial domination, the reactions of protesters may be seen as unjustified.

3. Theorising anti-colonial resistance to settler colonialism

Palestinians' use of violent and nonviolent resistance is certainly not new and has historically been used against colonial and settler colonial violence. Palestinian resistance to Zionist colonialism began in the 1880s as land dispossession became an increasing threat (Khalidi 1997). Takriti traces the long history preceding

the recent rise of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to the first calls for boycotts against Zionist settlers emerging between 1910 and World War One (2019, 60). The subsequent Palestinian revolt (1936-39) against British colonialism facilitating Zionist settlement in Palestine featured forms of violent resistance including incidences of arson, and direct attacks on Jewish settlers and their property (Nimr 1990, 43-55). The Palestinian *thawra* (revolution) launched in exile in the 1960s became known internationally for its use of armed struggle. Fanon's notion of "revolutionary violence" and guerrilla warfare were central tools throughout the *thawra*, shaping the strategy of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the entire liberation movement (PFLP 1970; Leopardi 2020, 17). The two Palestinian Intifadas (the uprisings of 1987-93 and 2000-05) saw Palestinians engaging in both violent and nonviolent acts of rebellion. The most prominent contemporary, though not the sole, actor deploying armed struggle against Israel is the de-facto governing authority in the Gaza Strip, Hamas. However, while violent resistance is no stranger to the Palestinian struggle for liberation, incendiary kites and balloons represent a significant novelty in such a history.

Theoretically, to explain the use of incendiary kites and balloons during Gaza's recent protest movement, the article introduces concepts developed by anti-colonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon, focusing in particular on his essay "Concerning Violence" from *Wretched of the Earth* (1965). When people emerged in protest and defiance, the Gaza Strip was *already* a space of colonial oppression, which is a key feature in Fanon's theorisation of the appearance of political violence in resistance. As Fanon identifies violence as the only *modus operandi* of colonialism, it becomes an omnipresent feature of daily life for the colonised (1965, 61). The violence of colonialism is totalizing, pervading the subject physically and is implemented through the structural violence of the colonial system, which enforces the "systematic negation" of the indigenous' humanity (Ibid, 250). This causes a sense of shared injustice between colonial subjects, which can become a mobilising force (Ibid, 46). In acknowledging the constant violence imposed on indigenous people, Fanon suggests the inevitability to respond to oppression with forms of violent resistance. Yet, the use of force that Fanon speaks of is not an *a priori* justification for violence, but is a revolutionary violence that counters colonialism. As Said also notes, "violence cannot be enough and strategies of politics and reason must come into play", arguing that there is a "need to balance violent force with an exigent political and organisational process" (1993, 284).

A central element that we can discern from Fanon for our understanding of incendiary kites and balloons is the effect that resistance has on the colonised subject. Fanon paid particular attention to diagnosing the emotions and experiences of the native; specifically, the effects that anti-colonial violence produces. "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force," Fanon notes, "[i]t frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (1965, 74). For Fanon a violent struggle for decolonisation allows the colonised not only to reclaim their humanity, but also to recreate themselves. In this way, the cleansing element of violence can have cathartic power. In focusing on the cleansing potential of violence, Fanon emphasises the ways it is a response to the natural feeling of violent rage caused by the inhumanity of colonialism.

Building on these concepts developed by Fanon, I draw on Palestinian theorisations of anti-colonial resistance to settler colonialism. In fact, as described by Nabulsi and Takriti (2016), Algeria's *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) greatly inspired the Palestinian strategy during the *thawra*. Given that Fanon theorised in the context of Algeria, using Palestinian notions of anti-colonial resistance can more precisely ground the analysis. In a theoretical text produced by Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fateh) titled *The Liberation of Occupied Countries and the Method of Struggle Against Direct Colonialism* (1967) a clear vision for successful anti-colonial struggle is put forward. It theorises the conditions for "the liberation of occupied countries and the manner by which direct colonialism could be struggled against" (1967, 2). In

doing so it adopts a settler colonial frame, situating Palestine within similar settler colonial contexts such as Algeria, Rhodesia and South Africa (1967, 1). There are three ways that this text can further our understanding of the mobilisation of incendiary kites and balloons. First, the discussion provides an early recognition of how "in its subjugation of peoples, colonialism initially depends on military power, modern tools, and technological means" (Ibid). The text identifies the high-tech versus low-tech dichotomy when considering how anti-colonial wars of liberation "pit technologically and scientifically advanced forces of occupation possessing massive arsenals against the forces of the colonised people fighting with primitive old weapons and tiny resources" (1967, 7). Over half a century later this asymmetry is still dominant, and the mobilisation of incendiary kites and balloons show that they are a response to the asymmetry in power. For Fateh, however, the low-tech/high-tech disparity should induce a popular war of the masses. This is the second element that will be used to show the potential and also limitations of deploying incendiary kites and balloons. Here, Fateh's theorisation established that "the war of the masses increases the anxiety, nervousness, and insecurity of the coloniser and ruins the aims underlying its presence such as exploiting the human and natural resources of the colonised country" (1967, 7). The launchers of incendiary kites and balloons had some of these intentions – to destabilize the coloniser's rootedness on the land - and only briefly achieved that quest. Yet, the vast disparity between the armed struggle that Palestinians (and Fanon) discussed in the 1960s and the kites and balloons, along with the inability to mobilise a war of the masses are significant constraints that should not be overlooked.

Lastly, the Fateh article diagnosed consciousness, at the individual and collective level, to have a central role for the liberation of colonised peoples. As it is stated, "the weakness of revolutionary consciousness or its complete absence amongst many colonised peoples aids the survival and consolidation of colonialism" (Fateh 1967, 2). It discusses the fear that permeates Palestinian consciousness and argues, "That is why *fida'i* operations have been launched, directly eliminating fear and curing the complexes of inadequacy and occupation" (Ibid)[5]. It is in this way that incendiary kites and balloons have the revolutionary potential to free native consciousness from fear and inadequacy, and provide an internally mobilising tool that is liberating for the individual. While noting the important limitations, I suggest building on Fanon and Palestinian theorisations of violent anti-colonial resistance can be a helpful frame to further understand this new phenomenon.

4. "We want to burn the crops of settlers": Articulating the launch of aerial explosives

The use of incendiary devices tends to be commonly explained as an Orientalist depiction of terrorism, which in turn can serve to provide justification and legitimisation for state violence. Zych's article (2019) situates their use as exclusively a Hamas tactic, therefore reducing them to terrorism. Zych's reduction of Palestinian resistance to Hamas-led armed struggle denies agency to the youths who started this tactic and fails to account for their motivations. Although it should be noted that Hamas sought to control and influence the use of incendiary devices - as a UN Human Rights Council investigation, the Israeli media and military also recognized - this initiative was not something Hamas started because it emerged as an autonomous grassroots youth initiative (UNCOI 2019; Gross 2018). Zych also furthers a racialized discourse, which tends to cast only Arabs or Muslims as terrorists while state violence remains always rational, legal, and therefore legitimate. Khen's (2019) work focused on the difficulty to categorize these new incendiary devices within

[5] *Fida'i* translates literally from Arabic to "one who sacrifices himself (for his country);" it is often translated in the English-language literature as "freedom fighters".

legal paradigms about the use of force in military operations. It is argued that Israel's intervention vis-à-vis the kites and balloons should "be regulated by the concept of self-defense and escalation of force procedure" (2019, 303). Contrary to Zych, part of Khen's reasoning for arguing that Israel should adopt a "self-defense" stance was the lack of evidence that this is an official Hamas operation, which prevents it from meeting the threshold for the applicability of an armed conflict paradigm (2020, 332). Yet, this appealing to international law's notion of "self-defense" is untenable in Israel's case, as is overwhelmingly acknowledged that it is still occupying the Gaza Strip despite its so-called "disengagement" from the area in 2005.[6] Thus, Khen's study is also problematic because it uncritically adopts Israel's hegemonic and Orientalist narrative to advance knowledge that supports the implementation of state violence. Instead, a more nuanced appraisal is necessary, which offers an understanding of the motivations for indigenous resistance to settler colonialism.

The voices highlighted below are from the first balloon and kite launchers operating between April 2018 and March 2019, after which the launching was halted.[7] In fact, in April 2018, on the second Friday of the GMR, groups of youths, claiming to be unaffiliated to political factions started to organise self-declared kites and balloons units (e.g. *Ibna al Zouari*/"Sons of Zouari"), aiming to break the aerial blockade and intentionally cause damage to Israeli property. The "Sons of Zouari" unit was named after the Tunisian engineer Mohammad Al Zouari, who was a member of Hamas' military wing Al Qassam Brigade and was allegedly killed in an extrajudicial assassination by Israel in 2016 in Tunisia. The unit is inspired by Al Zouari's method of resistance ("invasion by air") because of his role in the 2014 conflict in Gaza during which he supervised the use of Ababeel 1, an unmanned aircraft. Testimonies of protesters wielding incendiary devices stated that they see themselves as implementing his vision through "a simplified mode of popular resistance" (UNCOI 2019, 118).

While other organised activities during the protests such as the burning "tyre units" ("*Kushuk* units") caused thick black smoke to protect protesters from sniper fire, the incendiary kite and balloon units have a clearer offensive dimension. These incendiary kites and balloons have been weaponised through simple and extremely cheap means. Kites can be handmade (mostly from household objects or with wood from palm trees, ropes, plastic and paper) while balloons, either the ones used for birthdays or latex contraceptives, are inflated using helium. Overall, with under 3 US$, a weapon can be constructed. Palestinians began using balloons because they are less visible to the Israeli military and fly for longer distances, deeper into Israel, sometimes for four to five kilometers. To ignite fire, kites and balloons have been laden with a metal pouch containing Molotov cocktails, grenades and flammable substances such as burning coal, coals wrapped in chicken wire, or rags soaked in oil and fuel. Some balloons ignite shortly after landing through an incense stick that burns a packet containing an inflammable substance, whereas some kites are lit through the tail before launching. The wind from the Mediterranean Sea allows the kites and balloons to float into the Israeli side of the fence and reach distant forests, crops and agricultural lands. The winds of the southern Naqab/Negev desert – which carry hot tropical air - fan the flames and allow for more widespread damage. In several cases, they also landed in empty educational institutions and in private houses, causing property damage (UNCOI 2019, 78). The aerial explosives may be intended to also target people, yet they have remained nonlethal, as no Israeli as been killed.

From the discourses of those involved in launching the incendiary devices, it is possible to understand the reasons for taking on this specific action. Ahmed, 17-year-old, articulates in this way what drives him:

[6] See Erakat (2014) on the reasons why Israel cannot claim a right to self-defense in international law from actors operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

[7] Since then, they have reappeared sporadically and more systematically in August/September 2020, although outside of the context of the GRM.

> *We want to burn the crops of settlers. Every day they burn our hearts in killing the young and injuring them. They torture us. It is a simple act. We enjoy our time flying kites, and we make the Israelis suffer like us. They can put pressure on their government to make us live better (Eglash 2018).*

Rather than nonviolence, these tactics and discourse seemingly echo the settler-native dyad that Fanon (1965, 65) emphasised. As he highlights:

> *He [the native] of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free.*

Ahmed's quote clearly emphasises the violence inflicted on protesters by Israel's military during the protests and in response to this he calls for the need to target settlers' properties. He defines Israel's violence as a form of "torture" to describe the violence of Israeli snipers during the demonstrations. Rather than being a senseless use of force, his reaction to this violence shows the necessity to burn the harvest of Israelis living on the other side of the fence. In particular, Ahmed asserts a claim over dispossessed lands by explicitly using the word "settler" to characterize those living inside Israel in defiance of mainstream representations, which consider "settlers" only those Israelis inhabiting the territories occupied in 1967. This is also in line with the Great March of Return's demand to return to lands and properties inside the Israeli state.

A woman participating in the protests details the initial use of balloons (without inflammatory devices attached) as a symbolic action of resistance: "I also participated in protests each Tuesday, when we organised cultural national events and launched balloons with the names of Palestinian towns and villages that we were forced to flee."[8] Similarly, Warda al-Zebda, a 37-year-old woman who participated regularly in the protests, detailed how she felt free and connected to her original hometown now inside Israel when she flew the kites. She then explained how the same concept was eventually weaponised because of the Israeli military's violence:

> *The reason why these youth and children moved from flying harmless kites to flying the burning ones is the way Israeli forces responded since day one. People here have become aware that whether they use peaceful methods or not, they will always be faced with excessive force and showered with live ammunition; the result is always the same (Husseini 2018).*

Abu Mohammed Al Tayyar, nicknamed the "pilot", is the 21-year-old "spokesperson" of the "Gaza kite unit", and describes thus the reason for using the incendiary devices: "It is our only way to send a message to our enemy that these are our lands" (Mohanna 2018). Abu Mohammed further details the ways in which the incendiary kite developed:

> *We started by flying a kite decorated with the Palestinian flag to send it to our occupied cities, then we developed the idea to attach rags soaked in gasoline with the tails of the kites. We will break the siege on Gaza even if we have to send hundreds of thousands of kites over the border (Ibid).*

[8] Interview, May 2018, Gaza Strip.

Abu Mohammed's quote demonstrates the acknowledgement that dispossession and the siege can be resisted by sending kites to "occupied cities." During an April 2018 interview, another Gaza kite unit member stated: "not dozens but hundreds of kites will be flown toward the enemies, burning their crops, and causing them confusion and panic" (UNCOI 2019, 184). This quote is evocative of Fateh's theorisation that sees successful anti-colonial resistance as increasing the anxiety, nervousness, and insecurity of settlers in order to challenge their sense of belonging to the land. Indeed, protesters involved in direct actions of resistance against the siege adopted a discourse and praxis that displayed the necessity to target settlers colonising their lands.

Quotes from other protesters engaged in launching incendiary devices emphasise a crucial aspect of this tactic. While inside a tent at the protest site near Bureij - an area hosting a refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip - 20-year-old Abu Omar stated, "I build around 40 kites a day with the help of my friends, and we tend to fly all of them on the same day. I can't fly to see our occupied cities, so the kites do it instead of me, it makes me feel free" (Mohanna 2018). Abu Omar's words assert his understanding of being captive in Gaza, being denied the right to mobility and the right to return to dispossessed lands. Further, Ayyash, also a Bureij kite-maker, said his teams were working hard, because the kites "raise the morale and enthusiasm of the youth" (Ibid). A Palestinian journalist who was embedded with balloons launchers for a day in August 2020, argues that because of the enormous military disadvantage "people have thus turned to other means to show their anger, to inflict some damage back or simply to call attention to their plight" (Abu Eltarabesh 2021). He further quotes a balloon launcher saying "I fire balloons because I can. I also do this to avenge my martyred friends" (Ibid). In these quotes there is arguably evidence of the liberating potential revealed in the active assertion of agency and resistance against colonial structures of oppression. The resisters' emotions relate to the potential of this form of resistance to be cathartic and cleansing for the individual's consciousness; it can free from despair, inaction, and restores self-respect.

5. Challenging high-tech militarism?

Geography played a significant role in the methods of collective action during the GRM. Rather than occupying squares and streets, mobilisation around the fence became the battleground between the resistance movement and the Israeli military. Recent anti-colonial mobilisations in the Gaza Strip have seen resistance techniques going underground through the building of tunnels. The underground tunnels, argues Haddad, are an insurgent response against "Israeli ideological, political and military doctrines", as well as "the structured dependency and ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Authority" (2018, 71). With the deployment of low-tech aerial explosives, the air became the primary theatre of resistance operations. The post-disengagement era - when in 2005 Israel evacuated all settlers from the Gaza Strip - and the subsequent siege "altered the spatial design of Israel's settler-colonial presence" (Dana 2020, 188). To enforce this new spatial dynamic and to rule from a distance, Israel relies on air power and its high-tech militarism, which constructed an electric fence built in 2002 that was later "equipped with technologically advanced surveillance and lethal devices" (Ibid, 192). Given the highly technologized spatial arrangement around the fence, the emergence of low-tech aerial weapons reflects this context.

This form of resistance carried out mostly by Palestinian youths employing simple materials was a new challenge for which the Israeli military was not initially prepared. Rather than on the traditional battlefield, incendiary kites and balloons seemingly operate in a "battlespace." This shift in terminology is used to denote the increasing emergence of urban warfare in contemporary conflicts, where it has become "extremely difficult to distinguish international law's axiomatic classes of civilian and combatant" (Gordon

and Perugini 2020, 162). The kite and balloon launchers are not recognized as the canonical armed fighters since they are weaponising recreational objects such as toys, maintaining a non-armed status of civilian.

This caused a debate to emerge within the higher echelons of Israel's government and military. "There is a very real dilemma," an Israeli military official said, "You can't start a war over some balloons, but you can't do nothing either" (Srivastava 2018). This "dilemma" was exemplified in the exchange reported in Israeli media between Israeli government minister Naftali Bennett and the IDF Chief of Staff Eizenkot. During discussions on how to respond to the fires caused by the youths in Gaza, Eizenkot asks, "Are you suggesting dropping a bomb on people flying balloons and kites?" When Bennett replies, "Yes," Eizenkot concludes, "This stands against my operative and moral position" (PIC 2018). Leaving aside considerations on the ostensible ethics of military violence that Eizenkot alludes to, the conversation shows the potential, however small, inherent in the use of unconventional and nonlethal weapons such as incendiary kites and balloons to confront state power and cause disruption in Israeli politics. In this regard, Keysar argues that the incendiary kites and balloons subvert Israeli strategies of defense, confuse "its leaders and generals, and make the Israeli government spend millions of shekels to devise techniques and technologies that would beat the kite attack and bring the fires to an end" (2020, 7).

Eventually the state mobilised its racialised war on terror discourse, branding the fires as emanating from "balloon terrorism", "terror kites", "arson terrorism," and imparting full responsibility on Hamas for any confrontational action emanating from the Gaza Strip (IMFA 2018). The military's initial retaliatory measures included snipers shooting at kite and balloon launchers during the protests, using air strikes as "warnings" against the car of a kite's unit leader and Hamas' military positions. It first sought to stop the kites and balloons through installing detectors along the fence, combined with using drones and shooting down the fast-moving balloons (The Telegraph 2018). After this showed mixed results, the military deployed the newly developed Sky Spotter system to track their trajectory and then direct firefighters to the landing spots. The Israeli military, in collaboration with a private security company, also created a new "smart rifle sight called Pegion (dagger)" which relies on electro-optic sight to intercept incendiary kites and balloons (Azulai 2019). The military also developed a weapon called Light Blade, or *Lahav-Or* in Hebrew, which uses an optical tracking system to spot an intrusion and firing a laser to destroy the kite or balloon (Bryen and Bryen 2020). Another effort consisted in using drones with razor blades attached to them and ramming them into the kites or balloons and using a larger drone outfitted with a claw to catch the kite or balloon in mid-air and down it (Surkes 2018).

As others have noted (Halper 2016), the Israeli state is able to capitalize on counterinsurgency by innovating and advancing its military capability, which in turn positions it as an influential regional and global player among other states, extracting power and legitimacy for its settler colonialism and military occupation. Despite innovating on its military capabilities, these measures have been largely unsuccessful in preventing the attacks. As a top exporter of military equipment, often billed as "battle-tested" on Palestinians, the effectiveness of kites and balloons has partially undermined the narrative that portrays Israel's army as one of the world's most effective against non-state actors. If Gaza has been turned into a "laboratory" (see Li 2006) and a "showroom" then the failure to stop the kites and balloons cannot be used as PR for the sale of military equipment.

Unable to stop the attacks, the military resorted to forms of collective punishment, which included, *inter alia*, withholding monthly Israeli transfers of tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority (Heller 2018); suspending fuel deliveries to the Gaza Strip and reducing Gaza's fishing zone (Gross 2019); and blocking the import of helium (used to fly balloons) into Gaza (Srivastava 2018). Helium is used in hospital MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) machines among other uses. For Israel's military the inability to directly retaliate, e.g. with airstrikes, was because the use of this form of resistance remains below the threshold of

escalation and war. Perhaps the simplicity and unpredictability of these incendiary devices has been the reason they have momentarily challenged one of the most technologically advanced armies in the world. Because the attackers are Palestinian youth, including children as young as thirteen, direct strikes would not be easily justifiable in the media and with international public opinion. Unlike rockets and mortars, incendiary kites and balloons – however destructive they may be - are not yet seen as weapons of war. They are also more effective at breaking the aerial blockade than rockets and mortars, since their trajectory is unpredictable, making a traditional military response difficult especially since they have remained nonlethal (Stoil 2018). From the Palestinian perspective, this low-tech form of resistance means being able to momentarily break the siege and confront the military. Yet, it is evident that long-term they seemingly lack the force to change the balance of power and potentially pressure Israel to end its siege as the kite and balloon launchers demand.

6. Resistance against erasure from the landscape

The Palestinian side of the fence that separates Gaza from Israel has been deliberately turned into an uncultivable area, to the detriment of farmers in Gaza. In 2010, Israel declared it a "no-go area" and has periodically sprayed it with herbicides since 2014 (Forensic Architecture 2019). These are the lands on which demonstrators began their protests in March 2018. Meanwhile on the other side of the fence Israeli farmers have been able to cultivate the land. The incendiary devices set fire to a considerable number of agricultural fields and forests surrounding Gaza. According to Israel's Tax Authority, farmers have suffered more than 3 million US$ in damage, most of it from wheat crop losses (Zych 2019, 76). The fires caused serious loss of income, as farmers have lost everything they worked for over the course of a year. They also lament that it could take over two decades for restoring the fields to previous conditions. Amir Adler, who works in one of the kibbutz fields affected, said: "It is very imaginative, using something so low-tech, but it's devastating to see the fields we've worked so hard to prepare totally destroyed" (Mohanna 2018). However, the impact was restricted by the Israeli government immediately compensating the farmers for their losses (Heller 2018).

The fires, along with causing material damages, also had a psychological impact on the Israeli population. For instance, in the words of a local farmer, "On April 11, the first terror kite landed, and since then, my routine has changed radically. […] Last Friday was a total catastrophe, so many terror kites. […] It was horrible. They hurt us, they hurt us a lot" (KKL 2018). This type of disruption to their daily lives led to pressure on Israeli politicians for supposedly failing to protect the citizens' security. The damages drove Israelis to start protesting against the government for not maintaining their security (Siman-Tov and Schweitzer 2018, 3).

Along with crops and agricultural land, the fires significantly affected forests. In fact, the fires have ravaged forests that were planted on lands once the possession of Palestinians, whose descendants are now refugees in the Gaza Strip. Since the 1950s, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) has planted over 35,000 acres of forests in the Western Negev/Naqab, which surrounds the Gaza Strip (KKL 2018). Founded in 1901, the JNF remains a crucial parastatal institution in the hands of the Zionist movement, as it was involved in destroying Palestinian villages and then decided whether the land would become a new Jewish settlement or a forest. In this fundamental altering of the landscape in Israel/Palestine, argues Braverman (2009), tree planting became a central Zionist tool to settle and control. The colonisation efforts accelerated after 1948, when the JNF used tree planting to erase the memory and material remains of Palestinian villages destroyed by Zionist militias. Forests were also strategically planted in the proximity of remaining Palestinian towns to prevent their potential growth (Braverman 2009, 98-100).

Planting trees over destroyed Palestinian villages is not the only way the Zionist movement attempts to entrench its projects of ethnic cleansing. A related process also appears in Israel's plan after 1967 to conceal the destruction of Syrian villages in the occupied Golan Heights through building a ski resort on Mount Hermon to deliberately mimic European landscapes, specifically following the style of Swiss alps (Ram 2013). Ram (2013, 748) finds that despite Israel's efforts to "whiten" this mountainous region, the space itself posed a challenge given the unfavourable climate and topographic conditions not suitable for a ski resort. In addition, on one occasion Palestinian fighters from Lebanon contributed to its demise by managing "to infiltrate the site and detonate a handful of structures, rendering the resort inoperative for an extended period" (Ram 2013, 746). At the same time, the area continuously remaining in a war zone, amid military escalation between Israel and Syria, ultimately undermined this Zionist project of spatial mimicry.

A similar "whitening" process of spatial mimicry was thus also implemented through afforestation, characteristically based on pine trees imported from Europe, in line with the overall Zionist effort to Europeanize Palestine (Masalha 2012, 120-134). This quote from Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, aptly describes the role of trees in the imagination and strategies for colonising the land:

> *When I look out my window today and see a tree standing there, that tree gives me a greater sense of beauty and personal delight than all the vast forests I have seen in Switzerland or Scandinavia. Because every tree here was planted by us. (Ben Gurion,* Memoirs[9]*)*

The forests, composed of European and non-indigenous vegetation, thus serve the purpose to deny and erase the ethnic cleansing and destruction of Palestinian villages. By planting forests over destroyed homes and making it impossible to rebuild them, the JNF played a crucial role in preventing some 750,000 refugees from returning after 1948. The fires affecting JNF forests surrounding the Gaza Strip suddenly made the ruins of destroyed Palestinian villages still present on the land visible to Israelis. An Israeli photographer established an exhibition at the Museum of Art in the Israeli town of Herzliya, presenting images of what became apparent after large sections of the forests were burned. The areas that the exhibition showed include lands near the kibbutzim Or Haner and Gvar'am, which following the fires, revealed the ruins of the Palestinian villages of Simsim, Najd and Al-Mansurah. The incendiary balloons and kites made "them stand out; the scorched earth left behind by the fire gave them new visibility" (Reich 2019). The Palestinian inhabitants of these villages were forced to flee in 1948. Most became refugees in Gaza and a substantial number of their descendants still live in Gaza's Jabaliya refugee camp, one of the most densely populated places on earth. A review of the exhibition states that the Israeli photographer's lens "captures both the materiality and ghostliness of the now exposed ruins: stones on scorched earth, traces of the Nakba" (Johnson and Shehade 2019, 100). With incendiary kites and balloons burning JNF trees, Palestinians thus resist ongoing processes of settler colonial erasure.

7. Conclusion

In going beyond Orientalist and hegemonic depictions of Palestinians as "terrorists," this article suggests paying further attention to incendiary kites and balloons as a response of those resisting the violence of settler colonialism. While Israel's high-tech military progressively innovates, this militant technique went into the opposite direction and reverted to simple - yet not unsophisticated - means. As Tawil-Souri asks, "instead of wishing to be an 'equal' player in the high-tech network […] what if Gaza embraced its low-

[9] Quoted in Masalha 2012, 120.

technologization?" (2021, 158). Palestinians weaponising kites and balloons represent precisely this shift to "low-technologisation," which allowed them to break the siege and raise the morale and consciousness of resisters. Insurgent kites and balloons are a new phenomenon in the Israel/Palestine context that deserve further interrogation.

This article argued that the settler colonial dispossession and military violence that Palestinians in Gaza face spurs them to mobilise and create new forms of resistance. The air became a suitable space for resistance tactics due to the siege's physical barriers on land and the restriction of Palestinian mobility. What this technique reveals, is that the kites and balloons' greatest power may lay in internally mobilising Palestinians to continue the resistance. These aerial explosives can be liberating for the consciousness of the individual, allowing for the reclamation of humanity. The low-tech character of the weapon succeeded in provisionally breaking the siege in a way that high-tech weapons could not. A drone attempting to fly over the highly surveilled buffer zone between Gaza and Israel would likely be shot down immediately (Keysar 2020, 6). If the Great March of Return demanded an end to the siege of Gaza, the kites and balloons briefly enacted a suspension to it by physically crossing the Israeli imposed border. This permitted Palestinians to burn settlers' properties and lands, causing some disruptions in the Israeli military and political sphere as they scrambled to find a solution. Lastly, by burning Jewish National Fund trees planted on ethnically cleansed land, this Palestinian resistance brings to light and opposes processes of erasure from the landscape.

Attentive to the risk of romanticizing resistance the paper concludes by thinking through some important limitations that have emerged from the analysis. It remains questionable whether incendiary kites and balloons are long-term politically viable techniques of struggle. In the theorisations used by Fateh (1967) and Fanon (1965), the power of armed struggle discussed is much greater than the incendiary kites and balloons. The asymmetry is dramatically wider today than when Fanon and the Palestinian National Liberation Movement theorised anti-colonial resistance in the 1960s. These forms of direct action only posed a minor challenge to the Israeli state whose vast military superiority is very difficult to threaten. Also, the actual threat to Israelis has been minimal. Indeed, the violence Fanon identified that could create the "new man" meant that the native could do away with the coloniser. This is a goal which the incendiary kites and balloons seemingly cannot aspire to achieve. Fateh (1967, 2) also stressed the importance of mobilising the masses as crucial in the method of struggle for liberation, which incendiary kites and balloons so far haven't attained given the sporadic launches and small number of those taking part in this action. These aerial explosives, however remarkable they have been, evidently do not have the force to bring an end to the siege as the launchers demand. While it is uncertain if the mobilisation of kites and balloons is sustainable going forward, they have offered a lens through which appraise the intricacies of anti-colonial resistance.

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