Colonial management of death: To be or not to be dead in Palestine

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Abstract
During the late 1960s, Israel had a policy of withholding Palestinian corpses in secret cemeteries, in which each corpse was designated by a number, called the 'secret cemeteries of numbers'. During the last Palestinian 'al-Quds [Jerusalem] uprising' in October 2015, Israel again began withholding killed Palestinians' bodies, this time storing them in refrigerators. Tens of families experienced the detention and release of the frozen dead body of their relative. Drawing on 19 semi-structured interviews with families from al-Khalil (Hebron), this article traces Israel's political use of Palestinian bodies to dismantle Palestinian collectivity, and the Palestinians' use of the same bodies to rebuild their national collectivism. This article also describes Israel's use of its necropolitical and biopolitical powers to manage the Palestinian death, and the resistance strategies used by Palestinian families to oppose these powers. This study argues that necropolitics includes the coloniser's management of the colonised grief and bereavement, and the decisions about how, when, where and with whom the colonised should die. That is, it is the power to manage the structure and process of 'letting die' and being dead.

Keywords
Letting die, necropolitics, Israel, Palestinian families, slow violence

Introduction
Basel’s father said:

The Israeli intelligence called me and said, ‘Your son conducted an operation¹ in Bab al-A’mud.² You have to come to Etzion.³ I couldn’t go, so his uncle went. They showed him the pictures. . . .

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That same night they came to our home; they searched it and searched my father’s home upstairs. They asked questions about when he [Basel] left home, who knew about it [the operation], who sent him, and why. I asked them when they would give him back to us. They said, ‘Call the Palestinian DCO [District Coordination Office]4 and they will tell you.’ Since nobody was held before Basel, we thought they would release him. We called the Palestinian DCO, and they told [us] that the Israeli side didn’t inform them about releasing him. We remained nervous because my son [died] on October 14, when the Israeli cabinet decided to hold corpses on October 13. He was the first one that they held. Nevertheless, we made the three days of consolation and people came to mourn him. During these three days, ten were killed by the Israeli soldiers, followed by two girls. We made a huge demonstration to ask for the corpses. It was a huge demonstration where all the people in al-Khalil5 came and demanded the release of the corpses. Families from Jerusalem also came and participated. One day following this demonstration, they informed us that they would release five corpses, the two girls and the children. . . . My son was held for 75 days; every day we heard something different; they played with our emotions. On the day my son [was] killed, two more also were killed. . . . Death became part of our daily life; we became 18 families; this distracted me from my own trauma and [I] felt that it was a trauma for the whole community. We began to create pressure to get the corpses back. After 45 days of waiting I couldn’t stand it anymore. I couldn’t work. One Thursday we received the news that they would release them the next day, Friday. They chose that day because a snowstorm was expected. They chose it especially to prevent us from having an appropriate funeral. . . . Eighteen Palestinian ambulances came to the checkpoint when their [the Israeli] ambulances brought the martyrs. Each family member entered the ambulance and said whether the martyr was his son or brother or daughter; if he confirmed, the martyr [was] transferred to the Palestinian ambulance. We took the 18 martyrs to the hospital. We washed all the 18 martyrs, covered them in the coffins, and sent them clean to their families. I bid farewell to my son in the hospital; we took him to his mother at home; she and the family gave him the last look. When we released him from home, people took him. I explained to the martyrs’ families, ‘These are not your sons; these are Palestine’s sons.’ We took them from their homes to the mosque; there I gave the last look; after that, I don’t know who took him, who carried him. One hundred and fifty thousand people participated in their funeral. (16 March 2016)

Basel’s father’s testimony is one of 19 told by the families of 21 killed Palestinians whose bodies were subjected to Israel’s policy of withholding and freezing dead bodies, which was implemented in October 2015. Randa Wahbe (2020: 324) asserts that ‘since the war on Gaza in 2014, dozens of Palestinian dead bodies have been withheld in police morgues and refrigerators, all those of Palestinians who were killed by Israeli police’. At the time of writing this article, Israel is withholding 55 bodies in refrigerators.6 The bodies’ detention duration varied from days to months, with some bodies held for an entire year. The detention period depended mainly on the development of negotiations between the Israeli side and the Palestinian families regarding the release conditions; this resulted in longer holding periods for Jerusalemites, as conditions in Jerusalem were harsh and unnegotiable. The act of withholding killed Palestinians was proposed and led by Israel’s Public Security Minister, and approved by the Prime Minister.7 However, it was challenged by the military system, as its authorities claimed that many corpses were already being withheld by Israel and that similar strategies were minimally effective in the past.

Historically, this practice of withholding Palestinian corpses has a precedent dating to the late 1960s, when Israel buried fallen Palestinians in undisclosed zones without the
consent or knowledge of their family, and designated them with numbers (Wahbe, 2020). According to various human rights organisations, four such cemeteries are located in different areas within Israel’s borders. In October 2015, this practice returned as keeping corpses in refrigerators instead of numbered graves. Israel maintains that this strategy aims to prevent funerals from turning into protests that celebrate martyrdom and praise attacks against Israel. The fact that these decisions were made at a high level of the Israeli government indicates the governmentality of the colonial management of death, burial and bereavement of the colonised. Governmentality here refers to Foucault’s concept of linking the governor to the biopolitical control of populations (Foucault, 1991). Through negotiations between the government and the military system over the management of Palestinian death, a decision was reached to allow the conditional release of the corpses. These conditions included burial late at night, limits on the number of participants at funerals, the prohibition of cell phones at the funerals, and a deposit of nearly US$500 as a guarantee that the stipulated conditions would be met (Daher-Nashif, 2018).

Withholding dead bodies violates international law. Article 130 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Article 34 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention oblige all states to respect and follow the burial procedures appropriate to the religion and culture of deceased detainees during hostilities. Israel’s practices also violate decisions made by the Israeli courts. Specifically, the Israeli Supreme Court has ruled that human dignity applies to the remains of deceased persons just as it applies to the living, and it extends to the families of the dead. This is an example of Carl Schmitt’s ‘state of exception’, where the sovereign transcends the law on the pretext of ‘public good’ (Agamben, 2005).

These international and local laws were the basis for establishing the National Campaign for the Retrieval of Palestinian and Arab War Victims’ Bodies by the Jerusalem Legal and Human Rights Center (JLAC) in 2008. This campaign began when the family of Mashhoor al-A’ruri, who was killed during a confrontation with Israeli soldiers in 1976, asked JLAC to help retrieve his body from the cemeteries of numbers. Mashhoor’s body was released in 2009, but JLAC’s campaign continued its work with the aim of securing the release of all Palestinian and Arab corpses in the cemeteries of numbers. The campaign secured the release of 91 bodies in 2012 and 30 in 2014, and added the release of the frozen dead bodies to its agenda.

This article focuses on families’ lives parallel to the withholding and freezing of their relative’s body, mostly sons and daughters’ bodies, and on colonial and social inscriptions over the dead Palestinian body. In so doing, it fills a gap in existing research as sociological and anthropological studies on the Palestinian–Israeli issue mostly highlight the impact of colonialism on Palestinians’ daily lives and pay less attention to its impact on death and bereavement. Drawing on theories of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), bare life/death (Agamben, 1998) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011), this study takes an in-depth look at the colonial management of death, of the body, and of the daily life of the bereaved families.
The colonial management of colonised death

In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe states that ‘to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power’ (Mbembe, 2003: 12). This statement has subsequently been presented in several sociological studies on vulnerable groups, such as asylum seekers and illegal migrants (Davies et al., 2017; Mayblin et al., 2019; Round and Kuznetsova, 2016), to explore the consensus among politicians and powerful stakeholders that some human lives are worth less than others are, and it is permissible to let them die. Based on Foucault’s concept of biopower, which is the government of living and dying (Foucault, 1984), Mbembe (2003: 11) argues that necropolitics transforms this dichotomy to ‘making live/letting die’. He asserts that the ‘ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’.

Furthermore, since the colonised life is a ‘bare life’, i.e. being exposed to the structure of exception that constitutes contemporary biopower (Agamben, 1998), his/her death is bare too. Killing is in fact legalised by the suspension of the law when the colonised is continuously positioned within the state of exception. Agamben claims that sovereignty is practised through deciding what does and does not constitute a state of exception, i.e. the occasions on which the rule of law is suspended. He explains, ‘What is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule’s suspension. The rule applies to the exception is no longer applying, in withdrawing from it’ (Agamben, 1998: 18). Withholding and freezing Palestinian dead bodies is a practice of withdrawing from local Israeli law and from international law. Israel’s practices of making live or letting die are integral parts of Palestinians’ state of exception.

In settler-colonial regimes, the body is re-signified as a political body and becomes an arena for re-structuring the sovereign relationships between the coloniser and the colonised. This re-signification of the body is explained by Judith Butler (2004), when she clarifies how the Israeli military system otherises not only living Palestinians but also the death of Palestinians, considering it as others’ death, undeserving of sorrow or grief. Several studies have examined how the Palestinian body is directly affected on a daily basis by the political domain in which he/she lives (Daher-Nashif, 2019; Jean-Klein, 2001; Nashif, 2008; Peteet, 1994; Pitcher, 1998). At the same time, very few studies have examined the socio-political inscriptions on the Palestinian corpse’s flesh during its post-life existence (Daher-Nashif, 2017; Weiss, 2014). Jacques Derrida (1993: 62) explains clearly how death and the space of burial are politicised when he says:

> In an economic, elliptic, hence dogmatic way, I would say that there is no politics without an organisation of the time and space of mourning . . . without an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost [revenant] . . .

In her *Security, Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear*, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) asserts that colonial powers are founded to control the space of burial, but simultaneously, ‘Colonial surveillance cannot completely control the spectrum, ghosts of the colonised dead, who, in effect, continue to hold “hostage” and interrogate the very
legitimacy of the coloniser’ (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015: 117–118). She argues that by the law, Israel positions the Palestinian death, especially in Jerusalem, as lawless.

When the frozen corpses of Jerusalemites were released, burial in the late hours of the night was an unnegotiable condition imposed by Israel. This condition aimed to hide the dead and their funerals in Jerusalem. The families attempted to reject that demand because they wanted visible funerals for their relatives, as a sign of the ‘respect they deserve as martyrs’. The Public Security Minister then said, ‘Citizens of Israel don’t need to see, in the streets of Israel, a campaign of praise and glory for vile terrorists’. Only a limited number of participants were allowed to attend. Cell phones were banned, and military forces managed and observed the process. These rules and conditions aim to create a public scene where certain images, names and deaths do not appear, so that ‘certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is de-realised and diffused’ (Butler, 2004: 38). These conditions are part of Israel’s management of the Palestinians’ death issues and death rites (Nashif, 2015), and part of the modern colonial occupation that practises biopolitical and necropolitical policing and surveillance over its subjects (Mbembe, 2003).

Since Palestinian society is shattered and fragmented into several geopolitical contexts, the discussion and analysis of the practices and apparatuses of necropolitics and biopolitics should consider the where and when of death and not only the how. Leshem (2015) claims that Mbembe’s analysis and his two main questions – ‘What place is given to life, death and the human body?’ and ‘How are they inscribed in the order of power?’ (Mbembe, 2003: 13) – remain mostly remote from the particularities and materiality of place. He calls for a place-based approach that expands its reach to where it is exposed to the contingencies of lived space, and he suggests examining the necrogeographies of death within settler colonial entities (Leshem, 2015: 40).

The particularity of space-time is important in the issue of withholding Palestinian corpses because in many cases in the West Bank, where the Palestinian National Authority governs the population, such as in al-Khalil, Israel relaxed restrictions regarding funeral conditions compared to those in Jerusalem. That is to say, the slow violence created by necropolitical and biopolitical apparatuses was intensively exerted over the Jerusalemite corpses because Jerusalem is a particularly sacred place for both Israelis and Palestinians. In this case, this spatialisation of suffering is invisible and hidden in plain view as part of the banality and structural brutality of violence (Mbembe, 1992). Nixon (2011: 2) describes this hidden violence as ‘slow violence’ and as a ‘delayed destruction, occurring attritionally across space and time, and often out of sight’. Hence, the question that arises here is which tools of slow violence does Israel use on the bodies of the Palestinian dead and on the families’ daily lives? Moreover, which necropolitical and biopolitical apparatuses does Israel use to manage Palestinian death, to manage letting or suspending death?

**Methodology**

This study aims to shed light on the issue of freezing and withholding Palestinian corpses by Israeli military forces and to explore how this practice influences families and the Palestinian community. A qualitative explorative design with the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to develop a better in-depth understanding
of the families’ lived experiences. Nineteen (19) semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members of 21 killed Palestinians from al-Khalil whose bodies were withheld and released. The inclusion criterion was being a nuclear family member, i.e. a father, a mother, a brother or/and a sister, of a killed Palestinian who had been held, frozen and released. The exclusion criteria were being an extended family member, a nuclear family member of a withheld but not released dead Palestinian, and a nuclear family member who had not witnessed the process of withholding and releasing the body. The study used the snowball approach to reach families. A local lawyer who is also a human rights activist helped in reaching the families and obtaining their initial consent to be interviewed. The interviews ceased when no more family members agreed to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ homes, except for two interviews that took place in the workplace of the father. The study assured the principles of professional competence, integrity, scientific responsibility, and respect for people’s rights and dignity. Ethical standards such as competence, confidentiality and informed consent were also assured along the research. Both researchers did not have previous knowledge of or a relationship with the interviewees. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who decided whether to use their real names or pseudonyms. The interviewees were informed that they had the full right to withdraw at any stage of the study, to reject recording, and to ask for the transcript and products of the study.

Since this study addresses trauma and distressing issues, i.e. the death and withholding of a family member’s corpse, it is considered ‘sensitive’ research. Conducting ‘sensitive’ research and interviewing people on their experiences with traumatic events can present a challenge to both interviewers and interviewees (Fahie, 2014; Lipscomb, 2010). While several studies have discussed the traumatic impact of conducting research on sensitive topics on both researchers and subjects (Elmir et al., 2011; Fenge et al., 2019; Jehn and Jonsen, 2010), the phrase ‘sensitive’ research was first clearly defined by Lee and Renzetti (1990). For them, ‘sensitive’ research ‘potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or the dissemination of research data’ (1990: 512). In this study, both interviewees and researchers could be exposed to psychological and political challenges and risks during and after the study was carried out. Both could experience vicarious traumatisation, defined as distress caused by researching distressing and traumatic stories (Dunkley and Whelan, 2006). In addition to employing qualitative methods that provide flexibility while researching onsite, several characteristics of both researchers, and several planned actions have minimised these risks, and helped in managing the expected challenges. I am an experienced researcher in conducting ‘sensitive’ research on death and trauma, and the RA is an experienced lawyer and researcher in human rights issues. This enabled us to better ensure that the interview questions would not lead to emotional or political harm. Dunkley and Whelan (2006) argues that the experience of the researcher and his or her coping skills are the primary factors in mitigating the impact of ‘sensitive’ research. Nevertheless, since fieldwork is unpredictable, both researchers asked the questions carefully and empathetically during the interviews. Furthermore, when the interviewees experienced emotional distress, the interview was stopped and the interviewee had the right to decide to continue, to end and re-schedule the interview, or to withdraw.
The primary political challenge was fear of political retribution as a result of addressing the issue of withholding the Palestinian bodies. Fear was accompanied by stress when crossing a military checkpoint or entering a family home, where incidents of the studied cases had occurred. The RA and I continuously discussed and reflected on the stories as a tool to debrief, reflect and re-frame our and the interviewees’ feelings. This type of reflexivity has been found to encourage researcher self-care, improving responsibility and professional handling of challenges in the fieldwork (Lipscomb, 2010).

For analysing the data, the study followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) grounded theory procedure for content analysis. This included open, axial and selective coding. The researcher and the RA read the data twice to determine patterns and categories. The two main derived categories were: Israel’s colonial management of death, and Palestinians’ national management of death. Credibility was achieved by adopting well-established methods, familiarity with the culture (both researchers are Palestinian), iterative questioning during the interviews, seeking the input of professionals, and debriefing with an expert in sociological research in the Palestinian society. Objectivity was achieved by ensuring that the findings are the result of the voices, experiences and ideas of the informants only.

Findings

Israel’s colonial management of death

The story of Basel, reported in the introduction, clarifies the way Israel manages the fate of the dead and the daily life of the family. Basel’s case, like many cases, reflects the families’ collectivity in negotiating their relatives’ funerals in the face of Israel’s attempts to erase and mute their death and burial rituals.

Families’ lives following their relatives’ deaths. As happened in the cases of many other dead Palestinians, Israeli military forces broke into Basel’s home during the late hours of the night in order to be invisible to society and to prevent confrontations. All the families interviewed said that the Israeli army similarly broke into their homes. For example, the mother of Saed, whose body was held for two months and seven days, said:

One night when I was sleeping, they knocked the door but I didn’t wake up. They continued upstairs to my eldest son’s home. They knocked on his door forcefully with their weapons and broke the glass, shouting, ‘Open, open the door’. He opened to them and brought them here, telling them, ‘Please wait because my mother is an elderly woman living by herself’. He opened for them and they entered the home, took measurements, checked the walls, took pictures and left. (9 April 2016)

According to the families’ testimonies, they were always threatened with the destruction of their homes as a punishment for the actions of their son or daughter. Raed Garadat was held for six days. In his case, the army soldiers came to the family during the night when they already knew details about his life prior to his death, indicating that he had been under observation. According to his father:
They came on three and forty minutes in the morning [3:40 a.m.]. I heard voices around the house. . . . I opened the door; they entered my home asking all the family members to gather in the living room. . . . He [the commander] asked me about Raed’s room; I told him. He entered the room, looked into it and said, ‘You are a liar because Raed smoked here, and sat on the computer here and studied here, but he didn’t sleep here.’ They have information. (27 April 2016)

In this case, soldiers broke into the family home after the release of his corpse. In most cases, however, these late-night interrogations were performed while the body was still in the Israeli refrigerators and the families had no information about when their relative would be released.

**Management of burial and bereavement.** The families’ feelings of loss were intensified by threatening them with the loss of their homes. This threat is an emotional punishment that affected the processes of bereavement and mourning. Israel’s colonial management of Palestinians’ death was also performed by imposing a conditional release of the bodies. Surveillance, during the funerals and burials of the bodies, was an integral part of this management. Tharwat al-Sha’rawi’s son, for example asserted:

> They informed me that if I want to get her body back, I must bury her at midnight and limit the number of mourners. I said to them that I would agree to the burial time, but I will never agree to limit the number of people who want to pay their respect to my mother. (22 March 2016)

Tharwat was buried at midnight, with many people in attendance. Her son carried her coffin to her final resting place. This is another example of how killed Palestinians’ bodies become an arena for negotiating power relations between the colonised and the coloniser and how the colonised negotiate the colonial management of his/her death.

Most of the families received these same suggestions for conditional release from the Israeli side, but most of them refused, preferring to postpone the funerals instead of muting them. The families rallied the support of the whole community of al-Khalil. In addition to the community’s demonstration against withholding corpses, a sit-in tent was erected by the families, and all of al-Khalil’s families visited to support and console the parents of the deceased. Inside that tent, families discussed ways to reject Israel’s attempts to individualise the release, determined whether to accept or reject Israel’s conditions, and united their visions of how to face the Israeli military system. Both men and women participated in these negotiations. In fact, women played a dominant role and created a support group for the mothers of the dead. Furthermore, mothers participated in the funerals and carried the coffins of their sons and daughters for the first time in Palestinian society. This is an example of Frantz Fanon’s claim in *A Dying Colonialism* (1965) that gender-based taboos and social hierarchies can be suspended during efforts to resist colonial powers. Freezing the dead bodies resulted in a suspension and freezing of the gender differences existing in Palestinian society. Freezing gender differences can be considered as part of resisting Israel’s colonial practices, i.e. political oppression faced by social collectivism. The father of Omar, who was held for 50 days, explained:
When the corpses were detained, we made a sit-in tent near the Red Cross in al-Khalil. We were 19 families from al-Khalil; we sat in the tent for 24 days. The whole day. We did demonstrations, we wrote to the UN, to the foreign media and to all the media [outlets] asking to have the bodies back. Israel tried to convince us to get them [during] the night and bury them under conditions, but we were strict and refused these conditions. We wanted to bury them during the day in funerals of martyrs. (16 April 2016)

All these collective actions were taken to resist Israel’s attempt to manage, govern, mute and erase the Palestinians’ deaths. As Hamza al-Amleh’s father said, ‘The most helpful thing [during the 71 days that Hamza was held] was the tent near the Red Cross. We united our voices to reject their conditions. The union of our voices and powers had a huge impact’ (21 April 2016).

Frozen corpses, frozen lives. In order to reject invisible and individual burials, the families temporarily restructured and froze their feelings of loss. They also undertook a bereavement postponement until the release of the bodies. The collectivity and intensity of loss affected the way the parents felt during the withholding period. Many of the interviewees mentioned that they had felt very bad while their loved ones’ bodies were being held, but for the collective good and for the sake of their relatives’ rights, they were able to resist Israel’s attempts to demand an individual and conditional release. This can be considered a form of self-surveillance through which families control their feelings for the collective benefit. Families also observed the behaviours of other families and how they reacted to, and dealt with the Israeli conditions. When a family accepted the Israeli conditions, other families tried to convince them not to do so and to think about the collective interest.

All families’ lives were frozen in the sense that normal life was suspended until the corpse was released and buried. Many of the interviewees mentioned that their lives were restructured during the holding period. Families described frozen lives in which fathers and mothers couldn’t function. Omar’s father gave an example:

There is no evidence that your son is dead. They [Israelis] showed us pictures on phones. Just the face. You get the feeling that maybe he didn’t die. We were nervous the whole time and felt relief just when we got them back. During his detention, I couldn’t work, I didn’t go to my office, all we thought about was how to get the bodies back. We didn’t do anything. All the families sat in the tent near the Red Cross.

This is an expression of how colonial powers manage the families’ feelings of loss and their bereavement processes. Mothers sometimes didn’t cook and couldn’t provide the motherly warmth they used to give other family members. For example, Shadi’s mother described her health during the two months his body was held:

I couldn’t do anything. I was very sick. It was winter, and it was very cold. I got the flu all the time. I felt like I was in the refrigerator. People told me this was the result of sadness; three months I had the flu and felt breathless. (9 April 2016)

This feeling of cold was mentioned by several interviewees. One woman described how, during the period her husband was held, she felt very cold, even if she put on her warmest
clothes. In media interviews with Mutaz Ewisat’s father, he described the cold he felt every night. Mutaz is a Jerusalemite, and his corpse was held for seven months. His father said:

I sleep on an electric blanket for my back pain, and when I feel its warmth, I see in my mind’s eye my son in the refrigerator, so cold. . . . How am I supposed to feel? My son is dead but I’ve seen no body, so for me my son is dead and alive – we don’t have any evidence; we don’t have any answers; my wife cries every day and night. He was just a young boy.\(^{12}\)

It is important to mention here that after failing to convince the families to accept individual and conditional terms, Israel decided to release the corpses on a very cold winter day, when snow and storms were expected to occur. A’bd- al-Rahman Maswadeh’s father described that day:

A very strong snowstorm was expected to take place for a week or 10 days. They chose the worst day and decided to release the corpses, but thanks to God Almighty, it was only raining in the morning. During the afternoon, the rain stopped, and the sun came out. Like the world turned 180 degrees, all thanks to God. (17 April 2016)\(^{13}\)

After it failed to challenge the cultural structure of al-Khalil, Israel attempted to manage the funerals by using natural conditions: the darkness of night and the cold of winter. By the time this study was complete, the majority of the families in al-Khalil had received the frozen detained corpses on two dates: on 31 October 2015 and on 1 January 2016; the latter exchange took place on a very cold Friday morning.

**Palestinian national management of death**

**Bureaucratic and medical management.** Based on the families’ description, the process of releasing and receiving the bodies is as follows: when Israel decides to release a Palestinian dead body, they inform the Palestinian DCO. The DCO then informs the family as to the place and time they will receive the body. An Israeli ambulance brings the body from the refrigerator to a predetermined place, usually a military crossing point. A Palestinian ambulance joins the families at the meeting point. A family member, generally the father or eldest son, confirms the body’s identity, and then the body is placed in the Palestinian ambulance and taken to the main governmental hospital in al-Khalil. There, a forensic medicine staff, along with legal staff, perform the post-mortem examination when it’s permitted by the family.

According to the families, these post-mortem practices included x-ray examination and external examination by forensic medicine experts. These examinations were performed in order to check whether the military had stolen any organs from the corpses, because this practice had been observed in the past. However, due to the condition of many of the bodies, families couldn’t have an autopsy conducted even if they wanted to. Hence, freezing the body also managed the Palestinian control of post-mortem practices. Hikmat Hamdan’s family, for example, wanted to perform an autopsy, but the doctor who examined the frozen body told them that they would have to wait at least 72 hours
for the body to thaw.\textsuperscript{14} For the family, it was very hard to wait three more days for burial after Hikmat’s corpse had been detained in a refrigerator for three weeks. Freezing the bodies also had legal implications: it froze the ability of the families to bring their cases to international courts and prevented the verification of the circumstances of the killing along with any impartial investigation. This prevented families from holding Israel accountable.

Some post-mortem practices other than autopsies were performed on the frozen corpses. E’z-Aldeen Abu-Shakhdam’s family explained that when his father received the body, E’z-Aldeen’s brain was in a plastic bag, half of his head and face were missing, and three plastic surgeries had to be performed in order to reconstruct his facial features enough that his mother and sister could see him for a last farewell.

Hadeel al-Hashilmoon was not withheld, but when she was killed, her father was the director of the hospital to which the corpses were transferred following their release. He described checking Hadeel’s body as follows:

The first thing I did, the same night, was take x-rays of her body. The next day I checked her body. I went with a nurse and a doctor; we took the body and checked entrances and exits of the bullets. By the way, I’m not only a father of a martyr but also a son of a martyr. My father was killed in 1967 when I was a child. [Even today] we don’t know where his body is. We are almost sure that his body [is] in one of the cemeteries of numbers. (May 2016)

**Socio-cultural management.** In general, after the post-mortem examinations, the body was washed and purified according to Islamic rules. Then, it was taken to the family’s home for the final farewell. Later, the dead bodies were taken by the men to the mosque for funeral prayers and then to the ‘martyrs cemetery’ for burial. Several Palestinian socio-political rules were frozen due to the frozen bodies’ impounding. Generally, when Palestinians are killed by Israeli military forces, they are ‘martyrs’ and because of that, their bodies automatically become sacred. They are not washed and purified according to the Islamic sharia rules. However, when their bodies passed through the Israeli refrigerators, the familiar custom was frozen because families felt the need to clean and purify the bodies.

Bayan’s body was held for 15 days. Her father said, ‘We washed and purified all five martyrs. Her mother and other women came to the hospital to wash her body. They purified her as required in Islam.’ Her mother further explained, ‘The martyr is not purified nor washed, but because they were in Israeli refrigerators, we washed them’ (5 April 2016). The washing of the bodies can be considered an act of purifying the body from colonial management of death, and preparing it for the social-national management of death rites.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Colonial powers throughout history have managed the lives of the living by managing the fate of the dead and imposing new governmental rules on funerals and burials. Israel is one of the modern colonial powers that manage Palestinian death, and it should be understood as a ‘concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical and
necropolitical’ (Mbembe, 2003: 29). When a Palestinian is killed, the identity of the deceased is not important to Israel; it is the body of a Palestinian, simply one of a national body, not a person’s body. Yet when Israel negotiates the release of a frozen body, it addresses families using individual discourse as a tool to apply pressure. Simultaneously, many Palestinian families resist these pressures and conditions by dealing with the dead body as a national body and ‘Palestine’s sons’. The families of the frozen and detained bodies turned their personal pain into national pain, which helped them reject Israel’s conditions. The collective ideology of Palestinian society in al-Khalil, which is an aspect of its tribal-patriarchal structure, was an enabling factor in uniting the families in their demands and helping them resist the temptation to receive the corpses on an individual basis. Israel’s conditions aim to erase the existence of the Palestinian ‘martyr’ and ‘clean’ its space from ‘symbols’ of resistance. When the families resist the conditions, they resist the erasure and the individualisation of resistance. Individualising pain and releasing corpses on an individual basis make it easier for Israel to trace and observe the funeral and burial of each corpse. Furthermore, conditioning the release on burial at night makes it easier for Israel to not only observe each death rite but also mute families’ pain from the public sphere. It is an act of watching the invisibility of killed Palestinians and tracing the elimination of the families’ sorrow. Hiding the body and burial of a killed Palestinian leads to muting his/her presence, his/her family’s voice and his/her death. In describing ‘Palestinian guerrillas’ killed in warfare on the border between Jordan and Israel, Jean Genet (1992: 82, in Pitcher, 1998) evoked this paradox:

[T]he death of a . . . fedayee made him all the more alive, made us see details about him we’d never noticed before, made him speak to us, answer us with new conviction in his voice. For a short time the life, the one life of the now dead fedayee took on a density it had never had before.

By withholding and freezing bodies, Israel is suspending and freezing both its own laws and international law. An action by which the state annuls its own laws must be understood as the emergence or re-emergence of a lawless sovereign power (Butler, 2004: 61), through which the subject (the colonised Palestinian subject) enters a suspended zone and his/her death becomes a bare death (Agamben, 1998). The suspension of death, accompanying the suspension of law, produces a situation whereby death becomes a spiral, not linear. In these cases, Israel lets the Palestinians die twice: on the day of their death and on the day their body is released. Since freezing the bodies allows them to exist in a status of absence, it is both a suspension of being dead and a suspension of letting die. By freezing bodies and releasing them later, Israel imposed sovereignty over who deserves to be erased socially, politically and biologically, i.e. biological changes following death. Freezing the body stops the biological process of dying, which prevents its decomposition and ‘protects’ Israel from being accused of abusing the dead. Here Israel uses nature again to be legally protected.

The colonisation of Palestinian communities is also present in the sensory experience that this practice of freezing Palestinian bodies creates. The face of a dead person turns into a death ‘mask’ upon death (Handelman, 2006), yet when the Palestinian face is also frozen in the Israeli refrigerators, the death mask is dual. It is a freezing of the already
frozen face, i.e. the death mask. Later, the face becomes a third death mask when it begins to thaw. Furthermore, he coldness of the body is experienced by the family members, who report feeling cold like the frozen bodies. Constance Classen (1997: 401) explains this by claiming that, ‘We experience our bodies and world through our senses’. This relationship between colonialism and the senses is highlighted in two different tracks within colonial studies. The first track focuses on how colonialism makes sense to the colonised life and how they frame the colonised socio-cultural practices through their senses. The second track highlights how colonialism structures and re-structures the senses of the colonised. Among other scholars, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2017) explores how colonising the senses is part of Israel’s colonial practices over Palestinians in Jerusalem. She explains how parades, marches, graffiti and other artefacts and Israeli national practices within the space of the city invade the senses of the Palestinians. It imposes on them what to see, hear and touch.

All these political inscriptions over the dead body are accompanied by socio-cultural and national norms. In The Rites of Passage, Van Gennep (1960) explains how social norms and practices become inscribed on the dead body throughout its transition to its final resting place; at this liminal stage, the corpse shifts from one status and definition to another. In death rituals, the body’s transformations are linear-causal, and in a status of ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1969). Douglas (2002) describes this phase as an anomalous state, disrupting the line between life and death, during which the corpse is ‘abjected’ by the society and, as a result, is transferred and excluded to its burial (Kristeva, 1982). Through this transitional liminal phase, the body exists in a state of ambiguity, neutrality and invisibility (Turner, 1969). While these social theories have addressed prevailing meanings imbuing practices of death rituals and transitions, little attention has been paid to cases wherein rites differ from the norm to become restructured, as in conflict and war zones or colonised zones where the political intersects with the socio-religious (Daher-Nashif, 2018). In the case of the frozen Palestinian bodies, the linearity and liminality of death rites, the abjection of the corpse, the state of betwixt and between, and the anomaly of corpse all become irrelevant. This study explores this irrelevance clearly. Families and the Palestinian local community want the dead bodies and look forward to their transition from being excluded in refrigerators to being included within the community and in the ‘martyrs’ cemetery’. The Palestinian dead body has political roles and functions, and because of that this corpse is desired, not abjected. Israel’s dis/letting die practices call for stepping beyond the existing Western theory on the linearity, ‘liminality’, ‘anomaly’ and ‘abjection’ of death.

The imposed structure of burials and funerals and Israel’s management of the Jerusalemites’ death issues render the Palestinian Jerusalemites’ deaths invisible and erase them from the Zionist ‘holy city’ space, marking another Israeli policy of segmenting and dismantling Palestinian identity by dividing Palestinians’ deaths into different rites, categories and identities. This categorisation is another attempt to segment the Palestinian community by performing different types of death management. This can be added to several Israeli attempts to fragment the Palestinian community into subcategories for easier control and sovereignty. Among others, Tawil-Souri (2011a) explains how Israel uses both high-tech and low-tech techniques for implementing this policy of fragmentation. For example, using different colours of ID cards to differentiate Palestinians
living within Israeli boundaries from those who live in the West Bank and those who live in Gaza is another way to mark and ‘erect boundaries’ around and among Palestinians (Tawil-Souri, 2011a: 88; see also Tawil-Souri, 2011b). The geographically based fragmentation created by Israel’s differential treatment of the dead based on their region of origin parallels the use of these differently coloured IDs.

Necropolitics, in the case of freezing Palestinian dead bodies, is not only the act of deciding who deserves to live and who deserves to die but also of deciding the structure of the dead body’s time-space and about its socio-political and biological death. The months and years of withholding the bodies are ‘slow violence’ that incorporates the dis/allowing of biological changes, burial and grief; i.e. dis/allowing the nature and culture of death.

By killing, detaining and freezing Palestinians, Israel’s necropower creates new variations of death that attempt to cancel Palestinians’ agency over their death and its rites, but at the same time, it produces new Palestinian agency over the dead bodies. The Palestinian use of death, the role played by the dead Palestinian body, and the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians over the body are all expressions of the necropolitics managed by the colonised Palestinians. That is, necropolitics and the management of death are not only exercised by the controlling power over the oppressed, but also vice versa (Leshem, 2013; Nashif, 2015). Israel’s necropolitical apparatuses are not only about letting die or letting live but also about what the bereavement of the dead Palestinian’s family will look like. Freezing bodies is a new way to punish families by freezing their lives in parallel with their loved ones’ freezing, and thus is a new way of using death to colonise natives’ emotions and bereavement. This interruption in death rituals is a form of colonisation that shapes the funeral and burial of the dead other. A funeral in Palestine provides a collective solidarity that is also a powerful arena where grief can be harnessed for political mobilisation (Tamason, 1980). If one of Israel’s apparatuses as a settler-colonial regime is to eliminate the lives of natives (Wolfe, 2006), here it does so by eliminating their death. Hence, the issue for Israel, and for Palestinians, is of death and not of dying. As such, biopolitics and necropolitics are not just about the kind of life that is prohibited and the disallowing of life (Fassin, 2009) but also about the kind of death that is prohibited and the disallowing of death. Holding this position enables Israel to negate death by postponing it through withholding dead bodies. As Judith Butler (2004: 33) said, ‘If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again).’

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Dana Amro, lawyer and researcher from al-Khalil, for her major assistance in collecting the data. I also thank the families who agreed to participate in the study.
Funding

This work was supported by the Arab Council of the Social Sciences, through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York [cycle 2]. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

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Notes

1. They refer to his attempt to attack Israeli soldiers.
2. Bab al-A’mmud (Damascus Gate), located in the northern part of the Jerusalem Wall.
3. Etzion is group of settlements located south of Jerusalem.
4. DCOs are Israeli-Palestinian military coordination offices established as part of the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreements between the Palestinians and the Israelis. DCOs were established in each district of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to control the Palestinians’ movements in and out of these areas.
5. Al-Khalil/Hebron is a Palestinian city located in the southern area of the West Bank, 30 km south of Jerusalem.
6. See: www.wattan.net/ar/news/301253.html (accessed 3 August 2020).
7. At that time, the Public Security Minister was Gila’ed Erdan, and Binyamin Netanyahu was the Prime Minister.
8. See: https://news.vice.com/article/discreet-funeral-and-no-autopsy-israel-places-strict-conditions-on-return-of-palestinian-attackers-bodies (accessed 25 September 2018).
9. Some families had more than one withheld body.
10. The study follows the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics (1999).
11. Tharwat’s body was held for 47 days. Her funeral took place in the late hours of the night, but many people participated in her funeral and burial. For the full story of her body, see Daher-Nashif (2018).
12. Interviewed by Harriet Salem, 19 February 2016. See https://news.vice.com/article/discreet-funeral-and-no-autopsy-israel-places-strict-conditions-on-return-of-palestinian-attackers-bodies. (accessed 26 September 2018).
13. A’bd-al-Rahman’s body was held for 21 days.
14. For more information, see: https://news.vice.com/article/discreet-funeral-and-no-autopsy-israel-places-strict-conditions-on-return-of-palestinian-attackers-bodies (accessed 26 September 2018).

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Résumé
À la fin des années 60, Israël pratiquait une politique de rétention des cadavres palestiniens dans des cimetières secrets, appelés « cimetières secrets des numéros », chaque cadavre y étant désigné par un numéro. Lors du dernier soulèvement palestinien d'al-Qods (Jérusalem) en octobre 2015, Israël a recommencé à retenir les corps des Palestiniens tués, cette fois-ci en les stockant dans des réfrigérateurs. Des dizaines de familles ont fait l'expérience de la détention puis de la libération du cadavre congelé de leur parent. À partir de 19 entretiens semi-structurés avec des familles d'al-Khalil (Hébron), cet article retrace l'utilisation politique par Israël des corps palestiniens
pour démanteler la collectivité palestinienne, et l’utilisation par les Palestiniens de ces mêmes corps pour reconstruire leur collectivisme national. L’article décrit également l’utilisation par Israël de ses pouvoirs nécropolitique et biopolitique pour gérer la mort des Palestiniens, et les stratégies de résistance employées par les familles palestiniennes pour s’opposer à ces pouvoirs. Cette étude soutient que la nécropolitique inclut la gestion par le colonisateur du deuil et de la douleur des colonisés, ainsi que les décisions sur comment, quand, où et avec qui les colonisés doivent mourir, c’est-à-dire le pouvoir de gérer la structure et le processus de « laisser mourir » et d’être mort.

**Mots-clés**
Familles, Israël, laisser mourir, nécropolitique, Palestiniens, violence lente

**Resumen**
A fines de la década de 1960, Israel tenía la política de retener cadáveres palestinos en cementerios secretos, llamados ‘cementerios secretos de números’, en los que cada cadáver era designado por un número. Durante el último levantamiento palestino de al-Quds (Jerusalén) en octubre de 2015, Israel comenzó nuevamente a retener los cuerpos de los palestinos asesinados, esta vez almacenándolos en refrigeradores. Decenas de familias sufrieron la detención y liberación del cadáver congelado de un pariente. A partir de 19 entrevistas semiestructuradas con familias de al-Khalil (Hebrón), este artículo rastrea el uso político por parte de Israel de los cuerpos palestinos para desmantelar la colectividad palestina, y el uso por parte de Palestinos de estos mismos cuerpos para reconstruir su colectividad nacional. El artículo también describe el uso por parte de Israel de sus poderes necropolíticos y biopolíticos para manejar la muerte de palestinos, y las estrategias de resistencia utilizadas por las familias palestinas para oponerse a estos poderes. Se argumenta que la necropolítica incluye la gestión por parte del colonizador del duelo y el dolor de los colonizados, y las decisiones sobre cómo, cuándo, dónde y con quién deben morir los colonizados. Es decir, es el poder gestionar la estructura y el proceso de ‘dejar morir’ y estar muerto.

**Palabras clave**
Dejar morir, familias, Israel, necropolítica, palestinos, violencia lenta