

The Zone in Reverse: Logistical Power and the Gaza Blockade

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Introduction

What are the blind spots of a view of logistics as 'capital's art of war'?¹ This lapidary definition can be said to encapsulate the primary angle of critique used in much of the recent, humanities-based scholarship on logistics.² Undeniably, logistics plays a pivotal role in the current model of capitalism; as such, its operational logic increasingly sets the rules for the restructuring of spaces and conditions of labour all along a world-encompassing supply chain. Yet this fact alone does not immediately entail that the field of operations of logistics can be strictly reduced to capitalist dynamics. Could it be that, in order to formulate an effective critique of logistics, one needs to venture beyond the horizon of capital?

Paradoxically, it is the relative success of a major political mobilisation around and against logistics that prompts us to pose this question. On 2 November 2011, about twenty thousand protesters marched into the port of Oakland – the fifth busiest container port in the US – causing a total shut-down of its activity. Widely discussed in the critical literature on logistics, the blockade of the Port of Oakland is often described as the most significant instance of the Occupy movement, because of the actual disruption it caused to the material flows of transnational capitalism. Among circles of the radical left, it has led to a discourse praising 'a move from the strike to the blockade' as a new paradigm of anti-capitalist action in the globalised condition.³ It would, of course, be foolish to pretend assessing, in general terms, the strategic character

of the localised actions of logistical disruption that have multiplied around the world in recent years; their degree of success, indeed, is to be measured first and foremost against the particular demands of the workers and activists undertaking them. Rather, what is perhaps worth questioning here is the conceptual schema that seems to emerge, more or less explicitly, from a number of attempts at theorising such actions: whereby logistics = flow = capitalism, therefore blockade = interruption = resistance.⁴ Here it should suffice to mention the example of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and of the blockaded Gaza Strip, in particular, to start disrupting such a schema. To anyone familiar with the situation in Palestine, the recent entry into circulation of terms like 'occupy' or 'blockade' as key slogans of a self-proclaimed global movement of emancipation may have sounded, to say the least, odd. What it raises is not merely a branding problem, but rather a conceptual one. Unless key sites of struggle over mobility and circulation, such as Palestine, are carved out as exceptions to an otherwise global rule of logistical capitalism, practices of obstruction and interruption cannot immediately be held as effective tactics of counter-power.

The main limit of the current critique of logistics that this essay sets out to discuss can be articulated as follows: due to an excessive theoretical focus on its instrumental role within globalised capitalism, logistics tends to be only considered in terms of the flows that it releases and speeds up; in turn, this tendency entails a conceptual decoupling of

logistics from questions of restricted mobility, isolation, or confinement. As a result, the current critique of logistics can be said to ignore a vast and significant domain of logistical operations. What would it mean to understand logistics as operating as much on the fostering of certain flows as on the hindering of others?

With a view to addressing this question, the essay turns to the blockaded Gaza Strip. While it is rightly perceived as a place of closure – one that is essentially bypassed by the flows of goods that logistics is meant to orchestrate – Gaza is nonetheless proposed here as a paradigmatic logistical site; in the process, the essay outlines a reconstruction of the problem of logistics as seen through the prism of Gaza. At its core is a call to approach processes of enclosure, isolation, and restriction of mobility as logistical operations — in fact, as a mirror image of the fast-tracking operations that logistics is primarily known for.

To develop this argument, the architectural perspective becomes critical. Indeed, an examination of the Gaza blockade as a material process reveals that the spatial and technical infrastructure used to obstruct circulations into and out of Gaza shares much in common with the one tasked with lubricating the flow of goods and labour around the globe. The essay proceeds by setting Gaza's architecture of confinement against the 'architecture of flow' that typically characterises logistical sites around the world.⁵ The material connections that are identified in the process form the basis upon which the proposed revision to the problem of logistics is articulated. The essay is thus structured as follows. A first section examines the particular relation between war and logistics that emerges from Gaza's recent past. A second section addresses the reversibility of the logistical apparatus through a reading of Gaza as a zone in reverse. A third and final section turns to Gaza's border crossings with a view to discussing the terminal as the architectural

paradigm of logistics. The conclusion returns to the notion of logistical power used throughout the essay, from the perspective of the expanded critical frame that it has outlined in the previous sections. [Fig. 1a, 1b]

War as the continuation of logistics by other means

In 2005, Israel launched a unilateral Disengagement Plan, which resulted in the withdrawal of the military positions and the dismantlement of the settlements it had established inside the Gaza Strip since 1967. It is no longer necessary to argue that this disengagement did not end the occupation of Gaza, but rather inaugurated an occupation of a new kind. In parallel to the disengagement process, the concomitant establishment, in 2007, of a drastic international blockade has turned Gaza into an experimental laboratory of colonial governance, where 'Israel fine-tunes a dubious balance of maximum control and minimum responsibility'.⁶ Rather than marking the boundaries of Israel's territorial sovereignty, the blockade thus forms the primary infrastructure of the regime of power currently deployed over Gaza.

The sea, land, and air blockade of the Gaza Strip has now entered into its second decade. By reducing the inflow of life-sustaining resources to a bare minimum for the survival of its two million captive residents, it created a structure of subjugation that is unparalleled around the world.⁷ Unlike a medieval siege, the purpose of the blockade is not to completely cut off the supply lines of the warring citadel of Gaza up to its final capitulation. Almost every day, some goods, some supplies, and to a lesser extent, some people do cross the border of Gaza in either direction. Such flows ensure the survival of an ever-growing population living on a narrow strip of land that has been rendered practically unfit for any form of productive economy. For this reason, the blockade could, at least in principle, last indefinitely.

The approval or denial of any crossings of the Gaza border is the remit of COGAT (Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories), a unit subordinate to Israel's Minister of Defence and commanded by a Major General of the IDF. Every day, via its official Twitter account, COGAT posts detailed statistics about the number of trucks it allowed into Gaza, the total quantity of goods they transported in tons, or the number of ambulance crossings it allowed.⁸ As an inexpensive public relations campaign, these daily tweets perform two distinct tasks. The obvious one is to downplay any allegations that Israel is strangling Gaza, by minimising, in the eyes of the general public, the degree of restriction to the flow of goods and people imposed by the blockade. The other one reveals, and in fact affirms, the real purpose of the blockade as a regime of power. Rather than simply obstructing passage, the closure of the Gaza border enables, above all, a form of centralised and meticulous oversight over distributed circulations – rendered by the detailed figures that COGAT is so keen to tweet. With the establishment of the blockade, the Israeli authorities have gained the ability to channel, monitor, and modulate the flow of everything going into and out of the Palestinian enclave. Parallel to the indefinite suspension of customary political, juridical, and diplomatic processes, logistics has thus turned into the main mechanism by which Gaza is effectively governed.

Since 2008, Gaza has endured three wars – which caused thousands of civilian casualties together with the recurrent, extensive destruction of its built environment.⁹ Not only has the blockade constituted the structural trigger of each of these wars, but also, arguably, their primary stake. The case of the latest war makes this point particularly clear. Aptly code-named 'Protective Edge', the 2014 Israeli military operation in Gaza had as its declared objective the destruction of the network of tunnels which had been dug in the subsoil of Gaza in response to the blockade.¹⁰ By opening up channels of unmonitored

communication across the border, those tunnels posed indeed a fundamental – one may say topological – threat to the exercise of a mode of power based on the control of all forms of circulation. The army was thus called on to remodel a contested terrain – to fill in the dangerous cavities through which Gaza was quite literally undercutting Israel's authority.

The army's role in shaping the spatial conditions by which Gaza is governed can be identified in many other instances and extends beyond the timeframes of its mobilisation for large-scale military operations. Another example is the permanent 'buffer zone' that runs along the internal perimeter of Gaza, and which considerably increases the fence's encroachment into Palestinian territory. Its thickness is variable – from a hundred metres up to three kilometres during military operations.¹¹ Regardless of the lines on a map, the territory where the people of Gaza can venture effectively ends where the army's bullets land; and it is through the regular shooting of anyone crossing that invisible line that the soldiers permanently posted along the fence remind the residents of Gaza of the current extent of the buffer-zone – or inform them of its new width.¹² This process has its exact counterpart on the maritime border of Gaza, where the limit of the permitted fishing area ebbs and flows according to how close to the coast the Israeli navy's ships are effectively patrolling.¹³ Gaza's variable geography must thus be understood as actively enforced and violently modelled by the Israeli army, so as to constantly adjust the degree of tightening of the blockade. As a peak of intensity in this enduring economy of violence, war is employed as a radical instrument in the continuous process of conformation of Gaza's territory to the mode of power it is subjected to.

Manifesting a thorough blurring of the distinction between the military and civilian domains, the Israeli army is increasingly mobilised to build durable infrastructural projects, designed to upgrade the

security architecture of the Gaza blockade. Since the summer of 2017, it has been constructing a sixty-kilometre long underground barrier that runs all along the Gaza fence – the depth and detection features of which remain unspecified – with the objective of getting rid, once and for all, of the problem of the Gaza tunnels.¹⁴ After it was deployed on the terrestrial, aerial, and maritime domain, the blockade's reach into the subsoil appears to complete Israel's project to hermetically seal off the Gaza Strip – except for the few gateways that remain under its total control.

Emptied out of any semblance of rule of law, the blockaded Gaza strip was opened up to the rule of logistics. Far from constituting a simplification of the legal structure of power, this process has rather led to a reconfiguration of its operational logic. The very etymology of our modern notion of logistics seems to echo this shift. While the term is commonly traced back to the Greek root *logos*, a number of linguists have stressed the etymological detour of the term through the Middle French *logis*, 'shelter for an army, encampment', itself from the Proto-Germanic *laubja* – 'shelter'.¹⁵ It could be said that it is outside the *polis*, and along military campaigns, that logistics has departed from the *logos* of the law. With this shift, the main problem of power is no longer to *legislate*, but to *lodge*; no longer to posit a frame, but to structure a motion. Whether the moving parts of such overall motion shall be hastened or restrained depends on the objectives of any given logistical deployment.

From the outset, the blockade of Gaza has been designed as a tool of 'economic warfare'.¹⁶ The severe reduction of all available resources was conceived by the Israeli authorities as a means to put pressure on the population of the Strip and lead to their ousting of Hamas. As revealed by the now infamous 'red lines' document, COGAT went as far as calculating the minimum number of daily calories required for every Palestinian in Gaza to

survive without starving; based on the average figure of 2,279 calories per person, it inferred the maximum number of food trucks to be allowed into the enclave every day. In practice, over the past decade, this logistical obstruction has been regularly falling far below its own red lines.¹⁷

The same policy applies to other basic needs of the Gaza population – from electricity to fuel, water, or cement. Over time, the technical apparatus employed to channel the circulation of such indispensable supplies appears to be undergoing significant upgrades. Established in the aftermath of the 2014 war, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) is a data-driven logistical framework regulating the inflow of construction materials into the enclave.¹⁸ For every single building project, an application must be submitted electronically that includes the details of the applicant, the exact location of the building, the purpose of the construction, and the amount of materials requested. Assembled and maintained by the UN with a distant involvement of the Palestinian Authority, the GRM database is then regularly reviewed by the Israeli authorities who approve or reject projects, thereby determining which packets of materials will be allowed into the enclave and which ones will be refused. As such, the GRM doesn't only support the continuation of the broad logistical rule imposed on the population of Gaza; it also marks a significant increase of the resolution at which it can operate.

Manifested, most commonly, by the 'just-in-time' principle commanding the global supply chains of today, the rule of logistics also seems to produce its own temporality: that of a never-ending present. When the only objective of power is to prevent an impending catastrophe, its response is to postpone it indefinitely, without ever overcoming it; in the meantime, dwelling on the verge of a catastrophe guarantees permanent access to an array of emergency measures.¹⁹ The offensive mode of warfare of yesterday used logistics in order to prepare for

a decisive event – victory or defeat – which would open up a new condition of politics. Today, the deployment of logistics as a mode of power in its own right consists in using all means necessary, including war, to organise an essentially defensive strategy: preventing a defeat, maintaining an advantageous status quo, keeping an inviable system running for as long as possible and against all odds. The blockade of Gaza crystallises this strategy.

The Gaza Strip under blockade points to an inversion of the classical relation between war and logistics – whereby war is turned into an instrument to support the durable enforcement of logistics as a mode of power. The purpose of the Gaza blockade is not to cut all ties with a political and territorial entity that has been declared ‘hostile’, but rather to establish a particular kind of control over it, based on the monitoring and regulation of all the flows that traverse it. In a movement that mirrors that of the Israeli Disengagement, the locus of power under the blockade shifts from the centre of the territory to its borders. It is indeed at the border – or rather, within a thick bordering apparatus – that the technical infrastructure necessary to the enforcement of the rule of logistics is situated. The key result of such logistical operations is a territorial differential, produced and maintained through the orchestration of a particular regime of mobility between an inside and an outside. But one may ask: which one is which? [Fig. 2]

The zone in reverse

Sprung out of the ruins of Mandatory Palestine, the Gaza strip is an accidental territorial entity – its geographical contours corresponding to an entrenching of the frontline of the Arab-Israeli war at the time of the 1949 cease-fire. As such, the Gaza Strip was born as a vast refugee camp and, in many respects, still is to this day. Throughout the period of its administration by Egypt, from 1949, and ever since its occupation by Israel, from 1967 onwards, the borders of Gaza have remained militarised.

During the 1970s and 80s, the residents of Gaza were generally granted permission to leave the Strip, primarily to be employed as a cheap labour force in Israel and its settlements. Following Israel’s revocation of all Gaza workers’ permits in 1991, the first Israel-Gaza security barrier was built in 1994. The process of gradual tightening of the border, through both economic and architectural measures, led to the establishment of the blockade in 2007.²⁰ With it, the degree of permeability of the Gaza border has reached new lows; yet, as discussed above, it is never completely closed: rather, the general condition of obstruction makes every cross-border circulation a matter of vital importance, while providing vast leverage to the authorities that decide over what may enter or exit Gaza. The blockade does not undermine logistics; rather, the blockade is itself a vast logistical operation.

As a fenced-off territorial formation characterised by the special regime of circulation applying to everything that finds itself within its confines, the Gaza Strip is not unreminiscent of a zone – this essential territorial tool for the assemblage of transnational logistical networks.²¹ While the zone and the camp are both common notions in architectural and urban theory today, they also tend to be approached as polar opposites and, as such, to be treated in separate literatures. Arguably though, the zone and the camp form each other’s mirror image and, together, constitute the spatial product of the rule of logistics.

The zone is generally defined as a territorial entity hosted by a state while enjoying a special status in relation to the order of sovereignty normally applicable over that state’s territory. Its particularity thus lies in its liminal condition, neither fully within, nor completely outside of the state. The plasticity of this legal and territorial status lends itself to a wide range of adjustments and exemptions from the constraints of the nation-state – particularly with regard to tax and labour laws – which makes the

zone an especially attractive base for transnational economic activities. With historical origins in the free ports of the Hanseatic league, the zone has turned into a crucial tool for the development and interconnection of global logistical networks. As an easily reproducible template, it functions as a spatial lubricant to the flow of goods, labour, and capital around the world, by creating a compact space where barriers to such highly valued flows can be radically lowered. Yet, in order to operate as a 'frictionless realm of exemption', the zone must be established as an enclosure, its spatial boundaries clearly delimited and, in most cases, materialised by an actual fence.²² In apparent contrast with the narrative of freedom and openness that sustains its worldwide proliferation, 'the zone is often a place of secrets, hyper-control, and segregation'.²³

When the zone is approached as the territorial paradigm of logistics – as the ultimate 'space of flow' – its material functioning as a closed and off-limit space tends to remain under-examined.²⁴ Conversely, as long as the camp remains predominantly framed as a singular exception, approached in static terms, with a focus on the regime of immobility to which it suspends those whom it encloses, what remains obscured is the essential, dynamic dimension of camps – by which 'a floating population [is] linked to the satisfaction of logistical demands'.²⁵

About two thirds of the people living in Gaza are food insecure today. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)

currently provides food assistance to more than 996,000 Palestinian refugees in Gaza, who do not have the financial means to cover their basic food needs... A further 245,000 food-insecure non-refugees, all falling below the deep poverty line, are targeted by [the World Food Programme] with food and cash-based transfers.²⁶

As a result of the blockade, the internal economy of the Gaza Strip has collapsed; starting with food, the fulfilment of the most basic needs of the Gaza population is largely dependent on external inputs and foreign resources, delivered through the complex circuits of humanitarian logistics. For this reason, the blockade is to be understood as a logistical operation not only in terms of the circulations that it obstructs but also because of the ones that it sets in motion.

Now an established theoretical tradition, the understanding of the camp as the paradigmatic space of exception tends to focus on an absence.²⁷ By delimiting a space where the law is suspended, the camp would strip its prisoner subjects from their former rights and reduce them to a condition of 'bare life'.²⁸ Such focus on what is missing from a postulated normal picture tends to prevent one from seeing and describing what has actually emerged within the juridical void created by the state of exception, what new technologies have been deployed in place of a 'juridico-discursive' model of power.²⁹ Studies of contemporary camps and other 'states of emergency' point, in contrast, to the fundamentally logistical rationality mobilized by humanitarian governance, which tends to 'neutralize political choices by reducing them to simple operational measures'.³⁰ In order to maintain the regime of suspended immobility that it is designed to establish, the camp relies on logistics. One of the defining aspects of the camp is therefore its dynamic relation to an outside, by which the mobility that it prevents is coextensive of the one that it demands. In this perspective, the camp constitutes a paradigmatic logistical site as much as the zone does.

A diagram emerges: the zone carves out a territory from the normal sovereign rules with the primary aim of releasing worthy and valuable flows across its borders – those borders being controlled from within and tasked with preventing any infiltration; while the camp, also resulting from a local



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

Fig. 1a: APM Maasvlakte II Terminal entrance, Rotterdam, February 2018. Photo: author.

Fig. 1b: Kerem Shalom Terminal entrance, Gaza/Israel, September 2016. Photo: author.

withdrawal of the normal order of sovereignty, has the function of containing the circulation of entities considered unworthy or dangerous – its borders, this time, being controlled from without and tasked with impeding any exfiltration. Thinking through the symmetry of the zone and the camp, positing them as the products of the same logistical rationality, opens up a specific understanding of logistics. At a macro level, the logistical mandate of optimising the mobility of people and things is achieved as much through the fostering of valued flows as through the hindering of unworthy ones. All the while at a micro level, the operations producing an overall hindrance of mobility for primary logistical targets requires that a whole set of secondary circulations be activated; and conversely, the smooth flow of ‘globally bound stuff’ is always a function of strict measures of restraint and containment.³¹

Of course, the model conditions of a diagram never match the complexity of its particular actualisations. By positing the zone and the camp as two abstract spatial conditions that jointly manifest the implementation of a single mode of power, the abovementioned diagram underlines the essentially differential order of mobility that logistics orchestrates. Yet, in practice, the zone and the camp are neither opposite nor mutually exclusive conditions. Many special economic zones also function as actual labour camps for their migrant workforce;³² and conversely, the advanced logistics that Gaza and other humanitarian sites depend upon reproduce a number of the characteristic functionalities of the zone.³³ In fact, once approached through the perspective of logistics, the zone and the camp reveal their essentially reversible character, ‘gathering an interior at one moment and guarding against an exteriority in the next’.³⁴

There are a number of cases of former military bases and detention camps around the world that have been turned into key logistical hubs – the security architecture of the former lending itself

quite naturally to safeguarding the operations of the latter.³⁵ Yet one project in particular, sited in Gaza specifically, does far more than illustrating the reversible character of the zone and the camp; it actually leverages this reversibility as its core strategy of growth. Started in the aftermath of the 2014 war, ‘Global Palestine, Connected Gaza’ is a ‘Palestinian private sector initiative that envisages Gaza as a globally relevant, knowledge based and resource efficient economy pursuing opportunities in high value-added services and niche manufacturing, trade and transportation’.³⁶ In other words, it is a project to turn Gaza into a zone. Unlike most of the NGOs and activist voices on the situation in Gaza, the project doesn’t simply demand the lifting of the blockade, the re-opening of the Strip, and its territorial reconnection to the West Bank; rather, it sets out to repurpose the infrastructure of enclosure originally built to isolate Gaza, so as to create a region-sized, ultra-compact, smart gateway to the Mediterranean that would serve both Palestine and Israel. Instead of flattening the territorial differential that the blockade has generated, the project is about exploiting it by reversing it, thereby turning it into an asset for Gaza and for the wider region.

Needless to say, ‘Global Palestine, Connected Gaza’ is a highly speculative project. Considering the level of precariousness and instability in which Gaza finds itself today, with fifty-three percent of its population living in poverty, an average of four hours of electricity per day, a rate of environmental degradation that led the UN to declare it unliveable by 2020, and the permanent threat of another attack by the Israeli military, the very act of designing a detailed vision for a connected Gaza reaching as far as the year 2050 may, at first sight, seem rather foolish.³⁷ Yet after taking a closer look, one might read this approach as an attempt to reckon with the particular conditions of logistical power that have come to define the reality of the Gaza Strip for many years already.

The initiative starts, it seems, from the acknowledgement of an impasse: that of leaving the resolution of Gaza's permanent crisis to the formally recognised political authorities in charge of it. Funded by a consortium of Palestinian enterprises in the fields of construction, telecommunication, finance, or real estate, the project negotiates its way forward by establishing links and gaining supporters across a wide range of agencies, think tanks, and NGOs, both locally and internationally. The vision itself was developed in partnership with AECOM, one of the biggest engineering firms in the world, which specialises in the development of large infrastructure projects. And it is only retroactively that the project sought, and obtained, an endorsement by a governmental institution – in this case, by the Palestinian ministry of local government, based in Ramallah.³⁸ As such, not only does the project articulate, through the vision it proposes, a specifically logistical model of empowerment for Gaza; but also, the strategy that it deploys to reach this objective already seems to follow, in many ways, the very channels by which logistics turns into power. At times leveraging, at others by-passing established governmental authorities, the power of logistics is fundamentally distributed, hinging on the disposition of its heterogeneous components. Besides, as a mode of power, it is often more effective when it is not immediately recognised as such – a point that seems to underpin the relatively inconspicuous project of flipping the Gaza blockade on its head and turning it into a thriving zone.

As a territorial interface designed to channel valuable flows in an efficient and controlled manner, the zone works by offering a single, compact spatial solution to an array of logistical demands. The camp works in the same way, but with the reverse objective: an equally efficient spatial solution to manage undesirable flows and enforce a particular regime of (im)mobility. Products of the same logistical rationality, both the zone and the camp form a node within a wider network of circulation. Among the

principles driving the secure and efficient management of such a network is a logic of centralisation of operational functions: as a result, circulatory flows that are omnidirectional and global in scope tend to be routed through evermore centralised nodes. Counterintuitively perhaps, the expansion of the reach of logistics as a mode of power is a function of the contraction of its nodes. In a fractal manner, that same process of contraction is central to the border architecture of both zones and camps, as well as, more broadly, to the architecture of logistics around the world. [Fig. 3]

Terminal Architecture

There are only two crossings that remain partially open along the Gaza border: at its northern tip, the Erez terminal – for pedestrians; at its southern end, the Kerem Shalom one – for all kinds of goods. With the establishment of the blockade, every cross-border circulation has been re-routed to Gaza's territorial extremities – located forty-five kilometres from each other – according to a binary human/non-human segregation. In total, two crossings to handle the needs of a population of two million: the Gaza terminals can only be described as engineered choke points.

The process of channelling all circulations through a minimal number of terminals, as witnessed in Gaza, mirrors a general tendency that is observable all over the world: from ships to seaports to cargo hubs, warehouses or (e-)distribution centres, the architecture of logistics is getting not only bigger, but also more polarised.³⁹ Contrary to much of the theoretical discourse from the early years of globalisation, which prophesied a demise of both location and distance as relevant variables in the 'space of flows' that was allegedly emerging, the logistical rationality made them ever more relevant.⁴⁰ With the rise of total cost analysis – a principle at the heart of contemporary logistics – every mile of transport, every square inch of warehousing, every minute of delay along an ever more tensed supply chain were

captured into a complex matrix of permanent calculation. The joint optimisation of the profitability and security of supply chains tends to translate itself, in spatial terms, into a process of aggregation of logistical operations: in the same area, under the same roof, behind the same fence. Operative at all scales, such a process of optimisation gives rise to the zone just like it leads to the terminal.

The Gaza blockade is a special kind of logistical operation, whereby the main target of the total cost calculus to be optimised is the minimisation of undesired mobility. At its core remains a principle of optimisation, with comparable spatial consequences to more common supply chain problems; yet the particularity of its strategic objective leads to unique operational conditions, as manifested by the Gaza terminals.

Permanently closed in 2007, the Karni crossing is nearly five times the size of the Kerem Shalom one and used to operate at an average capacity of 700 trucks daily.⁴¹ Its location in close proximity to Gaza city, the urban core of the Strip, would make it an obvious choice to minimise the cost of goods transportation into and out of Gaza. Just as obviously, in a logic of economic warfare where such costs are primarily borne by the enemy, Karni was among the first casualties of the blockade. With all truck traffic forcibly re-routed through the much narrower Kerem Shalom terminal, between 2007 and 2010 the average number of truckloads entering Gaza daily fell to 80; for the Israeli authorities on the other end, it is easy to imagine how the cost of thoroughly controlling every truck delivering goods to Gaza plummeted, once they could manage it all from a single and compact terminal.⁴² Importantly though, the estimated capacity of the Kerem Shalom terminal before 2010 was around 150 truckloads daily – which indicates that it was operated at just above half of its actual capacity. Due to mounting local and international pressure, in particular after the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in May 2010,

the Israeli authorities announced an ‘easing’ of the blockade in June of the same year. As part of it, the logistical capacity of Kerem Shalom was upgraded to 350 truckloads per day. Nevertheless, between June 2010 and December 2014, the actual average number of truckloads that entered Gaza daily was under 150.⁴³ After the thorough destruction of Gaza’s built environment during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge, and the entry into force of the GRM, the number of truckloads admitted into Gaza – a large proportion of them carrying only construction materials to rebuild it – increased sharply to new average of 300 daily over the past three years; while again, a new upgrade of the Kerem Shalom terminal – funded by the European Union – has brought its actual capacity to 500 truckloads per day. Drawing upon its well-known technical expertise in the field of logistics, the Netherlands donated two high-tech container scanners to be installed at Kerem Shalom, so as to expedite security checks and facilitate cross-border trade flows at large.⁴⁴ Following much negotiation about how Israel would use them, the scanners entered into operation in 2015, yet again not at full capacity. While the scanners could technically handle truckloads up to two metres high, COGAT imposes that the total height of goods stacked on trucks for commercial shipments out of Gaza does not exceed 1.2 metres – increased to 1.5 metres in February 2016, for agricultural products only.⁴⁵

From this brief dip into the mind-bending calculations by which the blockade is permanently recalibrated, the key figure to retain is the ratio between logistical capacity and effective throughput. Although highly specific to the context of the Gaza blockade, the way in which the Israeli authorities run the Kerem Shalom terminal can be read as a by-the-book implementation of the latest operational principle in global logistical management – namely, elasticity. Put simply, ‘elastic logistics refers to the flexibility to expand and shrink capabilities to align with the demands within the supply chain during



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: 'The Gaza Spatial Vision' (2016–2050). From 'Global Palestine, Connected Gaza' full presentation (2016), available at: <http://connectedgaza.com>.

Fig. 3: View of a 3D reconstruction of the Erez Terminal, based on clandestine photographs by the Active Stills collective. Part of the Borderground workshop convened by the author (October 2016). Full documentation available at: <http://borderground.info>.

a given timeframe'.⁴⁶ In order to be able to quickly adapt to fluctuations in operational conditions – be they of economic or political order – elastic logistics recommends that every node of the logistical network be run at a throughput rate that leaves a substantial margin on both sides of the capacity spectrum. The optimised terminal, therefore, is not the terminal where the gap between capacity and throughput is closed, but rather, one in which any minor operational adjustment can quickly scale up and see its effects propagated on both sides of the circuits that it governs.

The Erez terminal, on the other end, pushes the elasticity principle to an extreme. In the summer of 2000, more than twenty-six thousand Palestinian workers entered Israel every day through the Erez crossing which, in architectural terms, was a simple checkpoint. With the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, the number of crossings decreased sharply as the crossing was frequently closed.⁴⁷ As part of the 2005 disengagement plan, Erez was declared an international border terminal requiring, as such, a considerable upgrade of its security architecture. Completed in February 2007 at a cost of about thirty-five million dollars, the new Erez terminal is a vast, partly glass-walled complex that wouldn't look odd in an international airport. While its technical specifications make it capable of managing the crossing of forty-five thousand people daily, the entry into force of the blockade just four months after its completion meant that it never operated at more than one percent of its total capacity.⁴⁸ While substantial fluctuations have occurred from one month to another, the average number of daily exits of Palestinians through Erez between 2007 and 2017 was just 190.⁴⁹

With such a wide margin of manoeuvre between capacity and actual throughput, the Israeli authorities are able to make full use of Erez's cutting-edge security technology. The terminal is equipped with a state-of-the-art 'millimetre wave' body

scanner, developed by the California-based firm L-3 Communications Inc., which appears to be 'so sensitive that it creates a complete holographic image of the traveller and allows the screener to see even a tissue or penny stuck in a pocket'.⁵⁰ The very high resolution of this screening technology is what enables Israel to actually enforce the far-reaching restrictions intermittently imposed on Palestinians crossing through Erez who, as part of a new directive announced by COGAT in August 2017, are not permitted to carry a USB drive as they exit Gaza.⁵¹ Before reaching the scanner though, any candidate to exiting Gaza must walk through a nine hundred metre long, four metre wide caged passageway spanning the entire no-go zone imposed by Israel around Erez. In dazzling contrast with the width of the complex, this narrow and elongated excrescence is the clearest architectural manifestation of the revision of the terminal's programme: from maximising the secure flow of people, to securing their minimal flow.

As the respective cases of Kerem Shalom and Erez illustrate, the routing of all circulations through a single terminal and the concentration of all transit procedures within the same architectural complex gives extraordinary leverage to the agency operating it. Due to its spatial and functional compactness, the terminal works as a key multiplier of logistical power – both in terms of its scalar reach and its distributed intensity. The tiniest tweak to the protocols of circulation across the terminal – of a few centimetres here, a few pixels there – immediately has exponential repercussions throughout the circuits that it connects. The architecture of logistics tends towards the terminal as both its formal paradigm and its political ideal: the optimal point of centralised control over the exchange between two or more circuits.

Conclusion

Over the time of the writing of this essay, in Gaza, 3,778 unarmed protesters were shot with live

ammunition, and 131 were killed.⁵² They were shot by Israeli army snipers posted on the other side of the Gaza fence, as they dared to venture into the unilaterally imposed buffer zone that runs all along it. Unsurprisingly, it is along this fence – more precisely, along this heavily militarised, thick border apparatus – that protesters have decided to gather every Friday since 30 March 2018: this fence which indefinitely imprisons a population of two million people, negating their mobility, entrapping them into a passive condition of receivers of insufficient aid, and denying their most basic rights. By directing their ongoing demonstrations against the fence, protesters are challenging the material infrastructure of the regime of power imposed over Gaza. For that reason, they are being shot down.

Throughout this essay, the enduring blockade of the Gaza Strip was proposed as an extreme manifestation of what could be called the rule of logistics. Gaza under blockade points to the way in which logistics ceases to be a mere instrument to the deployment of a machine of power – be it war or capital – and instead constitutes a mode of power in its own right, with its intrinsic rationality and its specific mode of operation, at times even mobilising a war machine to secure its functioning. The domain of operation of this specifically *logistical* mode of power can be defined as the channelling, regulation, and modulation of all forms of circulation across delimited territories. The case of Gaza also shows that the exercise of logistical power doesn't only result in the accelerated capitalist mobilities that it is primarily known and critiqued for; rather, it can also be leveraged to produce conditions of confinement, isolation, and restriction of mobility. Through an examination of the logic of territorial delimitation that is central to the operations of logistics, it was argued that the zone and the camp were both spatial products of the same logistical rationality. Zooming into the border architecture of such logistical enclosures, the figure of the terminal was retained as the major architectural manifestation

of logistical power, in as much as it forms the most compact spatial solution to the demand of centralised control over distributed circulations. The links that were traced between the architecture of the Gaza blockade and that of more common logistical sites enabled us to posit that logistics, as a single spatial and technical apparatus, has in fact two modes of functioning with regard to the circulations that it governs: release and constraint. The defining character of logistical power may be located in this ambivalence, in its capacity to do both, alternately as well as simultaneously, and above all, differentially. At its core, what this essay attempted to outline is a notion of logistical power as a mode of power exerted through the production of a differential regime of mobility.

Developing an understanding of logistics as a differential technology may enable us to connect, both conceptually and practically, the forms of resistance to an overpowering circulation of capital with the many concurrent struggles over the denial of mobility.

Notes

1. Jasper Bernes, 'Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect', *Endnotes* 3 (September 2013), <https://endnotes.org.uk>.
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- of *Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (December 2012): 322–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2012.728533>; Ned Rossiter, *Software, Infrastructure, Labor: A Media Theory of Logistical Nightmares*, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Martin Danyluk, 'Capital's Logistical Fix: Accumulation, Globalization, and the Survival of Capitalism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 9 April 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817703663>; Transnational Social Strike Platform, *Logistics and the transnational social strike* (Autumn 2017), journal, <https://transnational-strike.info>.
3. The formula is borrowed from Alberto Toscano, although his own discourse is critical of such simplified framing. See Toscano, 'Lineaments of the Logistical State'.
 4. The most explicit formulation of this conceptual schema can perhaps be found in an article by Charmaine Chua, which opens with a report on the 'Block the Boat for Gaza' initiative that saw activists in the port of Oakland blocking an Israeli ship for several days, in solidarity with Palestine. 'The disorder of things is in the blockade', the article concludes, seemingly blind to the paradox raised by such claim. See Chua, 'Logistics, Capitalist Circulation, Chokepoints'.
 5. Deborah Cowen, 'Containing Insecurity: Logistics Space, U.S. Port Cities, and the "War on Terror"', in *Disrupted Cities: When Infrastructure Fails*, ed. Stephen Graham (Routledge, 2010), 83.
 6. Darryl Li, 'The Gaza Strip as Laboratory: Notes in the Wake of Disengagement', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 2 (2006): 38–55.
 7. UN General Assembly, Michael Lynk, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967' (23 October 2017), 17, <http://undocs.org>.
 8. COGAT, Twitter feed. <https://twitter.com>.
 9. See, among many other reports, those issued by the UN Commissions. Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict, A/HRC/29/52 (24 June 2015); Report of the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, A/HRC/12/48 (25 September 2009).
 10. State of Israel, '2014 Gaza Conflict: Factual and Legal Aspects' (May 2015), <http://mfa.gov.il>.
 11. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – Occupied Palestinian Territory, 'Gaza Strip Access and Movement – August 2016' (16 August 2016), <https://ochaopt.org>.
 12. 'Israel Routinely Attacks Palestinian Civilians in the Buffer Zone', Al-Haq (website), 24 March 2016, <http://alhaq.org>.
 13. Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 'Israeli Attacks against Palestinian Fishermen in the Gaza Strip (1 January – 31 October 2016)', PCHR website, 16 December 2016, <https://pchrghaza.org>.
 14. Daniel Estrin, 'Israel Speeds Up Underground Border Wall To Block Gaza Tunnels', npr.org, 24 January 2018, <https://npr.org>.
 15. Christian Heinen, *Geschichte der Logistik*. Master Thesis: 2004. p. 3.
 16. Amira Hass, 'Hummus Starts Trickling Past Israel's Blockade on Gaza', *Ha'aretz*, 9 September 2011, <https://haaretz.com>, Available at: <http://gisha.org>.
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 19. Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, 'Abandoning Gaza' in *Agamben and Colonialism*, ed. Marcelo Svinsky and Simone Bignall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 178.
 20. Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2014).
 21. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 25–69.
 22. *Ibid.*, 58.
 23. *Ibid.*, 67.
 24. Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
 25. The quote is from Paul Virilio, who was among the first to write about the logistical dimension of camps. It is worth quoting the whole passage here: 'The

- precious lesson of the camps and the gulags has not been heeded, because it was erroneously presented not only as an ideological phenomenon, but also as a static one, an enclosure. Its absolute “inhumanity” was but the ostensible reintroduction in history of the original social bestiary, of the immense mass of domestic bodies, bodies unknown and unknowable. What else has the proletariat been since antiquity, if not an entirely domesticated category of bodies, a prolific, engine-towing class, the phantom presence in the historical narrative of a floating population linked to the satisfaction of logistical demands?’ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 98.
26. UN OCHA OPT, ‘Monthly Humanitarian Bulletin’, May 2018, <https://ochaopt.org>.
 27. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
 28. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
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 30. Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency* (New York; Cambridge, MA: Zone Books – MIT, 2010), 16.
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 32. ‘Inside Dubai’s labour camps’, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2008. <https://theguardian.com>.
 33. See Gyöngyi Kovács and Karen M. Spens, ‘Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management: The Start of a New Journal’, *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* 1, no. 1 (20 May 2011): 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1108/20426741111123041>.
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 38. See endorsement letter (21 July 2016) available for consultation on the Connected Gaza website, <https://dvqlxo2m2q99q.cloudfront.net>.
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 40. Castells, *The Informational City*.
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Biography

Francesco Sebregondi is an architect and researcher, whose work explores the intersections of violence, technology, and the urban condition. Since 2011 he has been a Research Fellow at Forensic Architecture, former Coordinator of the collective project (2013–2015), and co-editor of its main publication 'Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth' (Sternberg Press, 2014). His investigative work on Gaza includes the 'White Phosphorus' report (2012, with Michael Sfard and Human Rights Watch), the 'Gaza Platform' project (2015, with Amnesty International), and the 'Conquer & Divide' platform (2018, with B'Tselem). Since 2015, he has been a CHASE-funded doctoral candidate at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths University of London.