The necropolitics of Gaza: Architectures of controlled space, surveillance, and the logic of psychological torture

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Abstract

Introduction: This article examines Israel's surveillance architecture in Gaza as a modality of coercive governance, assessing when and how digitally mediated practices may meet elements of torture under the UN Convention against Torture (UNCAT). The analysis is situated within debates on necropolitics, panopticism, and surveillance. *Materials and Methods:* We conduct a doctrinal review of UNCAT Article 1, triangulating NGO investigations, legal filings, and investigative journalism with scholarship on surveillance and trauma. *Results*: Reported systems—facial-recognition programs, large data-fusion databases, spyware, and persistent aerial surveillance—create conditions of continuous visibility and anticipatory threat. Testimonies and clinical reports describe hypervigilance, sleep disruption, depressive symptoms, and other markers of severe mental suffering, alongside state-actor involvement and asserted purposes (intimidation, coercion, punishment). Corroboration varies by source, but evidence converges on patterned psychological harm linked to surveillance exposure. *Discussion:* On the record reviewed, Gaza's surveillance practices plausibly satisfy UNCAT's severity, state-involvement, and purpose elements, with intent inferred from design and deployment patterns; definitive legal determinations rest with competent tribunals. *Recommendations*: We recommend in-dependent monitoring with unimpeded access, standardized documentation of surveillance-related mental harm, export-control due diligence for military-AI systems, and safeguards against indiscrim-inate datafication in conflict zones.

Keywords: Gaza, Surveillance, International humanitarian law

Introduction

This article examines the Israeli surveillance infrastructure in Gaza as a manifestation of necropolitical governance. Drawing on Mbembe's concept of necropolitics and Foucault's panopticon, it explores how digital surveillance extends beyond control to enact structural violence and psychological harm. Gaza is framed as a testing ground for technologies that transform visibility into a condition of existential threat.

History is often composed of a series of turning points, before and after, that point the way to progress or indicate the onset of decline. This is a truism. For Israelis, there was a 'before October 7' and the new calculus of the aftermath. Before the mass killings at the Be'eri kibbutz, and other Israeli locales, that reportedly saw more than 1200 people murdered, some, reportedly, in ghastly ways, followed by the Israeli reaction to the horror and the emphatic promise to hold the perpetrators of this crime accountable.

Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu said as much when he addressed the US Congress on July 24, 2024. Netanyahu reminded the chamber of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the two great nations. He talked about October 7th and how it was akin to the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941 and to the terror wrought on 9/11, and, as George Bush had two decades before, he painted the coming battle as "a clash between barbarism and civilization," and he pressed toward a vision of a new order that must now dictate Israeli policy to-

ward the Palestinians. Congress members gave Netanyahu 50 standing ovations, except for Palestinian American Rashida Tlaib, who held up a sign that read "War Criminal" on one side and "Guilty of Genocide" on the other. Outside, protesters raged against Netanyahu's visit and got arrested, while Netanyahu referred to them as "useful idiots" for terrorists.

The most important intention of Netanyahu's speech was his linkage to the American tragedy and its response to the days of infamy, and to reiterate the bond between the two nations. It also explicitly proposed that the War on Terror was not over yet and that the two partners must now redouble efforts to remove the "barbarians" around us, and amidst whose aim is to collapse civilisation. The short of this: Israel expected US weapons and logistical support in its 'war' on Hamas (and, by extension, Hezbollah in Lebanon). The 50 standing ovations answered his expectations. Before October 7, 2023, the United States had supplied around 69% of Israeli weaponry used in their assaults on their stateless Gazan neighbours (Semler, 2024). As the multiple actors allege serious violations of international law; several inquiries are ongoing. And their combined questions about compliance with international courts and mechanisms, such as the ICC and ICJ, as well as the suppression of pleas from NGOs such as Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders to stop the mass civilian killing, suggest a geopolitical future of lawlessness and moral desertion.

Israel's reaction to the incursion of October 7 was predictable. But when news broke that rapes, beheadings and brutal executions had, allegedly, taken place, most observers knew how intense the responding rage would be. As writer Sim Kern put it, "For every individual Israeli killed by a Hamas fighter on October 7th, I knew the IOF would slaughter tens or hundreds or even thousands more Palestinians in retaliation" (Kern, 2025). And when news broke that rapes, beheadings and brutal executions had taken place, most everyone could guess how intense the responding rage would be. Armed with American weapons of mass destruction, Israel laid to waste Gaza. By the time of Netanyahu's speech, the new policy had already bombed 39,000 Palestinians to death[1] , most of them women and children[2] , levelled Gaza, and seen Palestinians on the run for their lives.

Before October 7th Israel was in a pattern of containing Palestinians in Gaza, and the West Bank, and even in Jerusalem by watching closely by means of a digital panopticon what Gazans were up to, always suspicious that at some point there would be an eruption of terroristic violence, and that now and then restless Palestinians eager for radical change would have to be mowed down like grass (Dwoskin, 2021). This did not look to many people like a holding pattern meant to stall figuring out a road map for Palestinians and Israelis to travel together toward a two-state solution. Instead, it was a temporary historical bracketing waiting for a historical event that would allow the ruling Zionists to evict Palestinians from the Promised Land once and for all. This aim was, after all, clearly intended by remarks contained in Netanyahu's Amalek speech, when he called for driving the Palestinians into their own Exodus into Egypt weary, heartsick, broken-down, unwanted by anyone, and their culture and civilization razed by the decisions of an AI machine-thinking system sardonically named The Gospel, as if they were not worthy of human consideration. "We are not being surgical," one Israeli commander told the media (Davies, McKernan, & Sabbagh, 2023). Whether or not it was planned, erasure has been the net effect in the new necropolis of Gaza in which people move beneath a low-pressure system of persistent movement restrictions, aerial surveillance, and recurrent airstrikes documented by HRW (2023) and OCHA (2024).

This paper argues that Israeli and US interests have been closely aligned since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, united by the rhetorical inference of Never Again. The events of 9/11 have been referred to as "another Pearl Harbor" event that needed renewed flourishes of Never Again cleanser. October 7 was the predictable event that came despite the all-seeing panoptic warning system in place. While this paper does not follow the lead on that failure of foreseeing, the subject has been looked into by Israeli journalists (Haaretz, 2024) and American MSM (New York Times December 2, 2023) and by investigative journalists, including prize-winning American journalist, Seymour Hersh, who has pondered aloud in his blog about Netanyahu's motives for working with Hamas to begin with (Hersh, 2023 and April 04, 2024). In embassy cables released by WikiLeaks back in 2010, there is a suggestion that Israel preferred working with Hamas -- for political purposes.

Methods and approach

This study examines whether Israel's surveillance regime in Gaza satisfies the four elements of torture under Article 1 of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT): (1) severe physical or mental pain or suffering, (2) intentional infliction, (3) state ac-

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1   The latest figure is in excess of 63,000 Palestinians killed and 160,000 wounded, according to Al-Jazeera

2   According to a UN Report, the number of women and children killed is around 67%. See United Nations (November 22, 2023). Two Thirds of Gaza War Dead Are Women and Children, Briefers Say, as Security Council Debates Their Plight. Retrieved aon June 16, 2025 from https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15503.doc.htm

tor involvement, and (4) specific purpose (punishment, coercion, intimidation, or discrimination).

Temporal scope and data sources. The analysis focuses on the period from October 7, 2023, to August 2025, examining escalated surveillance practices following the Hamas attacks and Israel's military response. Sources include peer-reviewed scholarship on surveillance, necropolitics, and psychological trauma; reports from established NGOs and international organisations (B'Tselem, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UN OCHA), Investigative journalism with editorial standards from major outlets (The Guardian, Washington Post, +972 Magazine) and Legal documents and proceedings from the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice

Evaluation framework. The study employs doctrinal legal analysis to assess UNCAT compliance, structured around a systematic evaluation of evidence for each torture element. This legal framework is supplemented by critical theoretical analysis drawing on three theoretical lenses: Mbembe's necropolitics to examine sovereign power over life and death; Foucault's panopticon to understand disciplinary surveillance mechanisms; and Zuboff contemporary surveillance capitalism theory. These frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how digital surveillance operates as a form of slow violence and psychological domination.

Surveillance as torture

Crises have coincided with expansions of security powers to justify collective punishment.In Gaza's rubble, amidst the world's gaze, another crime hides in plain sight: the slow torture of an entire people through the cold calculus of algorithms. From facial recognition systems that catalogue Palestinians at military checkpoints to Pegasus spyware that infiltrates activists' phones, Israel has transformed occupied Palestine into a laboratory for twenty-first-century oppression—one where the boundaries between warfare, surveillance, and torture dissolve. This paper argues that Israel's surveillance apparatus, enabled by U.S. complicity and justified through apocalyptic Zionist rhetoric, inflicts chronic psychological harm that meets the definition of torture under Article 1 of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT). Further, it examines how Israel's strategic negligence of intelligence warnings before October 7, 2023—mirroring U.S. failures before 9/11—inquiries about a deliberate pattern of crisis exploitation to justify collective punishment.

The analysis proceeds first by dissecting Israel's digital panopticon, demonstrating how tools like the Blue Wolf facial recognition system and Wolf Pack fusion databases institutionalise a surveillance regime that weaponises privacy deprivation

(Foucault, 1977; Weizman, 2017). Second, it locates these systems within a broader geopolitical theatre, where U.S. military aid and diplomatic cover sustain what scholars now term "surveillance colonialism" (Zureik, 2016).

The urgency of this inquiry cannot be overstated. As the International Criminal Court (ICC) weighs charges of war crimes and apartheid against Israeli officials, and as South Africa's genocide case unfolds at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), this paper contributes a timely intervention: surveillance can operate not only as a security tactic but a a practice that satisfies elements of genocide determinations. By synthesising legal analysis, whistleblower testimonies, and comparative historical frameworks (including unsettling parallels to Nazi-era psychology), the study exposes how trauma, when weaponised by states, reproduces the very oppression it once sought to escape.

The digital panopticon

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon idea emerged from his visits to a penal facility in Russia in 1786–87, where he observed labour systems designed to maximise state benefit with minimal staff. His proposed circular prison ensured that inmates, isolated in their cells, self-regulated under the illusion of constant surveillance from a central watchtower, a design he claimed would reform criminals through discipline rather than brutality—echoing the Christian notion of God's omnipresent gaze[3]. Yet critics soon recognised that such "reform" masked a system of social control. Michel Foucault later argued that the panopticon illustrated a historic shift from sovereign power through punishment to disciplinary power through surveillance and normalisation, a logic that now extends into privatised neoliberal regimes of control, such as those employed in Gaza[4]

I argue in this paper that Gaza is a modern digital version of the panopticon. Every Gazan is watched over by a variety of surveillance data extractors designed to implement a system of spatial control (Tawil-Souri, 2011). It is the 21st century's most perfected panopticon—a penitentiary without walls, where disembodied, automated surveillance is the warden (Goodfriend, 2023). Every Gazan, indeed every Palestinian, is regarded as "inferior in rights and status to Jews" and subject to a system of differential rights and controls that B'Tselem and others characterise as apartheid (B'Tselem, 2021). This places each Palestinian in Israel's version of what US President Barack

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3   Jeremy Bentham, Panopticon; or, the Inspection-House (London, 1791).

4   Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 2019 [1975]).

Obama's Kill List referred to as "The Disposition Matrix[5]." The automation system that watches them waits for a mistake of utterance, action, or even though inferred by algorithmic profiling, in an architecture of outer and inner spatial control (Zureik, 2016).

Discussion

The gaze as torture: The tools of human deconstruction

Ships patrol the coastline, preventing entry and exit. Spy balloons map Hamas's underground network and can provide electronic jamming, surveillance drones circle like vultures overhead, and, more recently, "suicide" drones are used for strikes on displacement camps in Gaza (Drop Site, 2025). At checkpoints, biometrics go to work with facial recognition, gait profiling, iris scans, and fingerprinting. Online, all activity is monitored, tagged, and mapped to other users. SIM cards are tagged, organised, and tell your precise location. IP addresses are stored and cross-referenced. All Palestinian activity -- in Gaza, Hebron, and Jerusalem; and even overseas -- is harvested as digitised intel. And it extends beyond even that spatial threshold of the proximal, to encompass the invisible all around you, or what the NSA calls the panspectron, which not only registers what is visible to the human eye but also encompasses radio, radar, microwaves, cellular communication, and so on —. "In many ways, the Total Information Awareness (TIA) program[6] instituted by the Pentagon in the aftermath of 9/11 is panspectral in nature" (Dahan, 2013: 45). It sees all, even the unseen, and "the panspectron does not merely select certain bodies and certain (visual) data about them. Instead, it compiles information about all at the same time, using computers to select the segments of data relevant to its surveillance tasks. (DeLanda 1991: 206). The panspectron recalls US Senator Frank Church's warning in 1975 that even then, the NSA possessed the power to capture virtually every electronic communication and left one nowhere to hide.

This creates a climate of terror and anticipation for imminent horror . It is an omnipresent surveillance system. As B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, put it:

The entire area that Israel controls is ruled by a single apartheid regime, governing the lives of all people living in it and operating according to one organizing principle: establishing and perpetuating the control of one group of people – Jews – over another – Palestinians – through laws, practices and state violence (B'Tselem, 2025).

Calling it Orwellian is a starting point, but not yet enough (Dahan, 2013). What makes this open-air and inner processes prison most insidious is not simply its scope but its psychological effect: surveillance becomes not just a tool of spatial control, but a mechanism of torture. To live under this uncanny[7] gaze is to live in dread. And the means of producing that dread is the subject of what follows.

The tools of torture

'The Gospel,' Lavender, Blue Wolf, and Red Wolf AI-guided facial recognition targeting systems and like systems are installed throughout the Palestinian diaspora, from Palestine to Europe to the US and even far-flung Australia (Guardian, 2020). The technology is largely American. The Israelis are implementing a proof of concept regarding facial recognition, i.e., providing evidence that the Orwellian idea is not just theoretically sound but also practically viable. Blue Wolf is used in Hebron "which seeks to profile every Palestinian living in the West Bank. Each profile contains photographs, a family history, an educational background, and a security rating" (Middle East Institute, 2022).

This proofing, writes Antony Lowenstein in The Palestine Laboratory, is a deliberate and criminal showcasing of products to interested buyers in the surveillance market that opened with the emergence of "terror capitalism." Lowenstein writes:

Israel has developed a world-class weapons industry with equipment conveniently tested on occupied Palestinians, then marketed as "battletested." Cashing in on the IDF brand has successfully led to Israeli security companies being some of the most successful in the world. The Palestine laboratory is a signature Israeli selling point. (Lowenstein 2023)

This is the Israel that US neoconservative Elliot Abrams called a "model for the world" in fighting terrorism.

One facial recognition system can be linked with other systems that follow a target most everywhere, and such a network has long been established through the entities seemingly

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5   The Disposition Matrix, informally known as a kill list, is a database of information for tracking, capturing, rendering, or killing suspected enemies of the United States.

6   Total Information Awareness (TIA) was a mass surveillance initiative that began in the wake of the events of 9/11. Retrievable from https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2023/Surveillance%20Report%202023%20.pdf

7   The word uncanny comes from the German word Unheimlich. Freud wrote that it describes something that is strangely unsettling, mysterious, and slightly frightening, often due to its unusual familiarity or resemblance to something known. Freud writes, "The subject of the 'uncanny' is ...undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror...." (Freud 1919. p,1)

named after beasts from Revelations: Five Eyes, Nine Eyes, and Fourteen Eyes[8]. If the intention was to terrify with the anticipation of totalitarian horror ahead, then the names are well-chosen and apt.

Many people have been informed about Pegasus[9] spyware, the zero-click Israeli spyware from the NSO group that can hack any mobile phone without the user knowing it. It can harvest all data on your phone, including contacts, images, documents, GPS information, social media and other passwords, and view you through your camera and listen in through your microphone. Pegasus is similar to the NSA program known as XKeyScore, which Edward Snowden revealed to the Guardian in 2013[10].. Pegasus has been linked to the Saudi stalking of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi[11], who disappeared on a trip to the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul in 2018. Totalitarian governments are prime buyers of Israeli surveillance equipment. The US government has been a partner in the spread of such technology to nations without established human rights, such as the United Arab Emirates, where ex-NSA spies were revealed to be helping to institutionalise a system of surveillance similar to what America has (Washington Post, 2021).

Satellite and Drone surveillance represent an "aerial occupation" over Gaza and allow for the targeted assassination of Palestinian leaders; help enforce spatial control and space that can be inhabited by targeted obliteration of neighborhoods[12],

weakening collective resolve by constant or unannounced bombardments that bring psychological crisis and bring uncertainty to the procurement of basic essential needs to function as a human being, such as water, food and medical supplies. Israel is assisted in this campaign by the CIA based at Pine Gap in Australia (Declassified Australia November 3, 2023).

Israel and its partners[13] engage in dragnet social media collection. This includes all browsing activity such as website reads, banking, emails, WhatsApp chats and conversation[14], and hard drive data capture.

Biometric surveillance is both the obvious checkpoint ordeals one may go through -- iris scans, fingerprint scans, x-ray machines, all of which can be recorded and added to a database for future analysis. It also includes dental and medical records, all digitised, which can go into a portfolio or profile. In a dual-use system, such collection can be a convenience to you and authorities doing their job, or it can assist security agents in tracking your past and future bodily transitions. One might glean valuable information, such as DNA signatures. Biometric information is complemented by algorithmic information gleaned from a user's trip to the cybersphere. Algorithmic data is more difficult to understand for the average user because it is composed of probabilities and logical likelihoods over time (i.e., patterns of behaviour and even desire). Algorithms are extremely powerful in probing and analysing human strategic thinking and doing so at the speed of wire. A famous example of how powerful algorithmic analysis can be was when IBM's Deep Blue beat world chess champion Gary Kasparov in 1997, a first for a machine opponent. Another came more recently in Seoul when Lee Sedol, a legendary Go player[15], was soundly defeated by Google's DeepMind AlphaGo. Algorithms present a new, digital version of the Uncanny, as well as bloodless triumphs over the human mind at frightening speed. A recent development in biometric surveillance is the emergence of ChatGPT technology, which can be set up to analyse conversations (and other data) between

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8   The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an Anglosphere intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States Nine Eyes and Fourteen Eyes are countries with intelligence agreements with Five Eyes. (See Five Eyes at Wikipedia for an overview).

9   "Pegasus is an advanced form of spyware designed to install itself on Android and iOS devices without any action from the targeted user. Although not a widespread cybersecurity threat, its use by governments around the world has caused concern." (Norton AntiVirus 2025)

10   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/nsa-top-secret-program-online-data

11   See Raphael Satter, June 16, 2023, Khashoggi's widow sues Israeli spyware company NSO over phone hacking. Reuters. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/khashoggis-widow-sues-israeli-spyware-company-nso-over-phone-hacking-2023-06-16/

12   A helpful timelined visualization of this destructruction titled "A Cartography of Genocide," is available at Forensic Archictecture which has concluded: "The patterns we have observed concerning Israel's military conduct in Gaza indicate a systematic and organised campaign to destroy life, conditions necessary for life, and life-sustaining infrastructure." Retrieve full report at: https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/a-cartography-of-genocide

13   See Walid El Houri, May 12, 2025, Digital erasure: How social media platforms are silencing Palestinians in 2024. Advox Global Voices. Retrieved from https://advox.globalvoices.org/2025/05/12/digital-erasure-how-social-media-platforms-are-silencing-palestinians-in-2024/

14   See The Intercept, "This Undisclosed WhatsApp Vulnerability Lets Governments See Who You Message" retrievable at https://theintercept.com/2024/05/22/whatsapp-security-vulnerability-meta-israel-palestine/

15   Go is an adversarial game between two players with the objective of capturing territory. It can be traced back as far as the 4th century BCE. Sedol was considered invincible, nut he left his televised competition with AlphaGo looking shellshocked by the defeat.

Palestinians (or anybody else) and draw conclusions about the subject and the intentions. +972 magazine cites an Israeli officer in pausing the versatility of this new surveillance tool:

"AI amplifies power," an intelligence source who has closely followed the Israeli army's development of language models in recent years explained. "It allows operations [utilizing] the data of far more people, enabling population control. This is not just about preventing shooting attacks. I can track human rights activists. I can monitor Palestinian construction in Area C [of the West Bank]. I have more tools to know what every person in the West Bank is doing. When you hold so much data, you can direct it toward any purpose you choose." (+972 March 6, 2025).

This expresses a mandate that goes well beyond local containment and hints at totalitarian desires, or perhaps it was just a sales pitch.

Fusion Databases are an extraordinarily intrusive weaponisation of private information. This information is culled from a user's daily online social interactions, digitised records dating back to childhood, phone call records, chat transcripts, hospital records, voice samples for training that utility reps inform you about when you call about your bill, image samples from various licensing agencies and credit card companies, credit reports, and so on. They are used for comprehensive profiling and targeting purposes, and for building what NSA whistleblower Ed Snowden called a "permanent record" [16]. Reportedly, its cameras can even "see into homes[17]." These personal details are all stored in fusion databases[18]

Evidence of severe mental suffering
This paper argues that the types of surveillance and the intention of its gaze meet the criteria for torture according to UN-CAT Art. 1. For one thing, there is a difference between neutral or passive surveillance that might be deployed at, say, an airport or open public space, where citizens might regard such watching as benign and for their protection against harm, as opposed to personalized surveillance that penetrates one's psyche, armed with database biases, and intended to let one know that it is a gaze hostile to your life. Alternatively, it may be personalised as a group profile –say, probed for membership in, say, Hamas. Either way, you have discovered that if the hostile gaze is looking for a target, the result, if it finds one, may be the explosive destruction of an entire family, or building where the target is located, or an internet café teeming with collateral damage. You would never know when you would be hit. Such dread would be traumatic, beyond PTSD, which suggests an ending.

The European Parliament has already put out literature that speaks to the human rights implications of using drones and robots to kill people in a so-called warzone. Mass Media outlets, such as Guardian, have decried their use in war – or otherwise. The Directorate-General's report is troubled, for instance, by the difficulty in distinguishing civilians from combatants, which may lead to "signature" drone strikes that use probabilistic data to determine a strike, leading to careless strikes, many of which are likely to be determined as war crimes. Other critics have warned that such weapons present an opportunity for users in Gaza to have a ready "alibi" should an atrocity occur (Downey, 2025). Others report the effects of intense trauma and constant fear, resulting in nightmares, insomnia, and chronic sleep deprivation (Hamamra et al., 2025).

This infliction is intentional. It recalls the firebombing of Dresden, of which Winston Churchill was said to comment: "It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed." Amnesty International reports on how automated technologies are being used to implement apartheid (Amnesty International, 2023) and Human Rights Watch avers, "Once human beings are reduced to data points, surveilled, sorted, and categorized, it may make it easier to decide who should be subjected to harm, including targeting for lethal action, and to carry out those actions" (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This paper argues that such intentionally imposed trauma, brought on partially by AI surveillance and robotic weaponry, amounts to torture under the UNCAT.

Beyond the digital panopticon: When the gaze becomes torture and promises annihilation.
Torture is most often understood as a violation of the body—something tangible, something bloody. But Article 1 of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) defines it more broadly: not only the infliction of severe pain or suffering, but also

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16 As Snowden wrote in his memoir: "... to digitize something is to record it in a format that will last forever" (p. 15). In his memoir, Permanent Record, he rues the work he did for the NSA and CIA: "At the time, I didn't realize that engineering a system that would keep a permanent record of everyone's life was a tragic mistake" (P.6).

17 See Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Israel escalates surveillance of Palestinians with facial recognition program in West Bank," Washington Post, November 8, 2021, accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-palestinians-surveillance-facial-recognition/2021/11/05/3787bf42-26b2-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html on April 25, 2025.

18 Data fusion is the process of integrating multiple data sources to produce more consistent, accurate, and useful information than that provided by any individual data source. [Wikipedia]

its intentionality, purpose (e.g., punishment, coercion, intimidation), and the role of state actors. Under this definition, the tools of surveillance deployed against Palestinians in Gaza—and their psychological effects—constitute a slow, creeping form of torture: one that leaves no bruises, yet never lets the victim exhale (United Nations, 1984).

This digital torment is not accidental. In The Palestine Laboratory, Loewenstein (2023) documents how Israel has weaponised Gaza as a testing ground for surveillance and crowd-control technologies, later exporting them to regimes across the globe. The "lab rats" of this experiment are two million Palestinians, corralled in what Human Rights Watch and other human rights organisations have described as "the world's largest open-air prison." Here, surveillance is not about preventing violence; it is about producing paralysis, humiliation, and despair. Every digital signature, every moment of mobile activity, every emotional phone call becomes another input into the logic of domination.

It is not simply that Palestinians are watched—it is that they are made to know that they are watched, always. The gaze does not disappear when the drone flies off; it lingers in the mind, seeping into that place we used to call the soul. This is the essence of psychological torture: the internalisation of control, the colonisation of thought itself. As Fanon (1961) observed in The Wretched of the Earth, colonialism's most enduring violence is psychic. It teaches the colonised to anticipate abuse and adjust themselves to it. As Deleuze has it, "We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure...everyone knows that these institutions are finished... [and we await] the societies of control" (October, Winter, 1992, Vol. 59, pp. 3-7).

Recent research supports this conclusion. Studies on anticipatory trauma among occupied populations show that constant surveillance correlates with increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, depression, and suicidal ideation (Qouta, Punamäki, & Sarraj, 2013; Abujidi, 2021). The trauma is not positive; it is permanent. Gaza's children grow up knowing that their bedroom windows can be turned into sniper sights or drone targets at any moment. Their parents live with the horror that every digital message might be interpreted as a pretext for violence, their families reduced to data points on a death ledger.

Moreover, this trauma is not isolated from the rest of the world. It is broadcast. Israeli politicians regularly invoke biblical narratives to justify these actions, cloaking state violence in messianic logic. It is no coincidence that surveillance is paired with censorship and disinformation: the same apparatus that tracks Gazans also scrubs their voices from the global discourse.

Palestinian activists abroad are hacked, defamed, or doxxed. This is not surveillance as security—it is surveillance as extermination by erasure (Loewenstein, 2023).

The internalisation of this system leads to a disturbing psychological doubling. Palestinians are not just surveilled—they are forced to perform their surveillance. The algorithms expect patterns; any deviation is suspicious. A smile in the street, a visit to a cousin, a word on WhatsApp—each becomes an act of risk. This coerces Gazans into mimicking the logic of the machine, learning its preferences, appeasing its watchful eye. As Browne (2015) argues, surveillance is always racialised, always calibrated to suppress difference and enforce conformity.

The panopticon, then, is not just digital; it is spiritual. It rewrites the interior life, teaches dread, and disables imagination. This anticipatory annihilation is not accidental. It is the intended consequence of a deeper political strategy—what theorist Achille Mbembe has called necropolitics: the power to decide who may live and who must die. In Gaza, this power is not abstract. It is infrastructural.

Necropolitics and slow death: The digital-physical vice grip on Palestine

If Bentham's panopticon was designed to discipline and Foucault's surveillance state to normalise, Israel's digital matrix in Gaza represents a further evolution—toward what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls necropolitics: the sovereign right not just to discipline or exclude, but to decide who may live and who must die. In Gaza, surveillance is not a tool for managing risk; it is a predicate for erasure. It does not merely "see" Palestinians—it tags, tracks, and forecasts their death, and makes its targets self-conscious in every moment of the imminence of their demise. It is a horror prison. To cite a Palestinian philosopher, who died in a prison within the panoptic society:

There is nothing more harrowing or agonizing than for a person to endure the torment of oppression and suffering without being able to describe it, identify its cause, or trace its source... You find yourself unable to articulate your anguish, to name it, or even to utter a comprehensible cry of pain—an "Ah!" that the free might grasp and comprehend (unpublished letter from Jalbou Prison, 2009).

This necropolitical gaze, rendered algorithmically through biometric checkpoints, drone footage, and data-mined behaviour patterns, is a prelude to extermination. Israel's kill lists—generated in part by AI-enhanced targeting systems—reflect what Weizman (2017) has called the "forensic turn" in contemporary warfare, where military justification is post hoc and algorithmic guilt is ascribed through pattern recognition. In

such a schema, existence itself becomes an ongoing crime, and life in Gaza is a kind of deferred execution.

This logic is evident in Israel's "mowing the grass" doctrine—a euphemism for routine military assaults intended to debilitate Palestinian resistance. As Laleh Khalili (2020) notes, this approach produces not only immediate casualties but an enduring condition of degradation. Infrastructure is periodically obliterated; schools, hospitals, and water systems are rendered barely functional. The result is slow death, in Lauren Berlant's (2007) terms: not spectacular violence, but attritional destruction. It is life lived under a siege of scarcity, where time itself is weaponised.

Such conditions create what Jasbir Puar (2017) has termed "the right to maim"—a sovereign power that does not kill outright but disables, controls, and exhausts. In Gaza, this manifests as the routine injury of limbs, the denial of medical evacuation, the targeting of civilian infrastructure, and the throttling of electricity and clean water. The weapon is not only the missile or the drone—it is the bureaucratic blockade; the waitlist for chemotherapy; the rejection of travel permits; and the disintegration of hope. It is the murder of journalists on the ground at extraordinary rates who would report on the rubble of Gaza -- a feat that only Mohammed bin Salman, who allegedly ordered Khashoggi's death, could appreciate.

Moreover, the digital and the physical are no longer separable environs. As Weizman (2017) has argued, the terrain of Gaza has been vertically stratified by Israel's control of airspace and subterranean passageways. Surveillance drones colonise the sky while border walls carve up the ground. The human body is triangulated by both domains, its movements and emotions surveilled, constrained, and punished. In this sense, Gaza has become what Mbembe (2003) would call a necropolis—a city of the dead, where sovereignty expresses itself through the calibrated exposure of a population to premature death.

The psychological toll of this regime is vast. Suicide rates among youth have risen sharply, as documented by NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights. Parents speak of the "death of the future"—a phrase that captures not just despair but the systemic extinguishing of generational continuity. The gaze of the state becomes a curse passed down, an inherited trauma encoded in both memory and metabolism.

In the context of such suffering, the rhetoric of "self-defence" collapses. No state can justify the routine brutalisation of a civilian population under the guise of security when the underlying architecture is designed to deny them not only safety, but significance. To render a people perpetually surveilled, perennially wounded, and structurally starved is to engage

in necropolitical governance by other means. That war leaves no part of the human being intact. It hollows out the psyche, distorts perception, and conditions generations into a logic of helplessness and surveillance-induced self-discipline. The next layer of this analysis addresses precisely that internalisation: the psychological toll of living under constant digital scrutiny.

The psychological toll of living under the gaze

To be watched constantly is not simply a logistical burden; it is a psychic injury. Gaza's surveillance matrix, powered by facial recognition, drones, spyware, and data fusion systems, produces more than visibility; it produces hypervisibility—a condition in which Palestinian life is rendered suspect by default and subjected to a regime of continuous, inescapable scrutiny. The result is a deep, collective psychological trauma that transcends individual suffering and embeds itself in the fabric of everyday life.

The internalisation of this surveillance is a textbook example of Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power. In his account of the panopticon, prisoners begin to regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of being seen. But Gaza's iteration of this phenomenon goes further. The surveillance apparatus is not merely a threat of observation—it is a indicatesn gateway to harm. A child tagged by a facial recognition camera may become a target; a WhatsApp message may be used to justify a missile strike. Thus, Palestinians are not just self-policing to avoid punishment—they are navigating a field of algorithmic landmines, where any action might trigger lethal consequences.

This produces what psychologists have termed hypervigilance—a constant state of mental alertness in anticipation of danger. According to studies by Qouta et al. (2013) and El-Khodary & Samara (2019), children in Gaza exhibit elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalised anxiety, and behavioural regression. These are not anomalies; they are adaptive responses to an environment in which the future is always conditional, and the self is always exposed. The trauma is chronic, ambient, and intergenerational.

Further, this omnipresent gaze triggers a phenomenon that psychologist Lisa Guenther (2013) has described as social death: the erosion of one's ability to interact meaningfully with others due to isolation, fear, or surveillance. In Gaza, the home is not a refuge. Family gatherings, bedroom conversations, and even hospital visits are monitored. There is no sanctuary—not physical, not emotional, not digital. This destruction of relational space severs the communal bonds necessary for resilience, turning solidarity into risk.

One especially pernicious consequence is the emergence of anticipatory murder—the persistent psychological state in which individuals live as though already marked for death.

This is not merely fear of violence; it is the normalisation of non-future. Teenagers forego dreams of university. Parents steel themselves for the possibility that their children may not survive to adulthood. As Khalili (2020) notes, life under siege restructures time itself, replacing aspiration with resignation. In this way, surveillance becomes an ontological condition: it defines not just how Palestinians live, but what they believe living means.

This psychic degradation is compounded by the knowledge that escape is impossible. The border is sealed. The sky is hostile. The internet is monitored. Even exile offers no reprieve, as Palestinian activists abroad face digital harassment, hacking, and algorithmic suppression on social media platforms (Loewenstein, 2023). The panopticon, once a building, is now a borderless state of being. It migrates with the body, encoding trauma in flesh and thought alike.

In such conditions[19], suicide is a major concern[20,21] and rates have risen above already worrisome heights[22].

The cumulative effect is a form of psychological torture that meets all four conditions of the UNCAT definition: severe mental suffering, intent, state involvement, and purpose (United Nations, 1984). It is also a warning to the world. Gaza is not an exception. It is the laboratory model. If unchallenged, the techniques pioneered there—predictive profiling, biometric tagging, AI-curated suspicion—will metastasise across the globe.

Global complicity and exported dystopia
The panopticon is no longer national; it is transnational. Israel's surveillance and psychological warfare against Palestinians is neither designed nor sustained in isolation. Rather, it is embedded in a sprawling global infrastructure of complicity, in which American, British, and Australian systems, technologies, and ideologies contribute materially to the torment of a besieged people. Gaza is not merely a crime scene; it is a theatre of innovation for the surveillance-industrial complex.

American complicity is foundational. U.S.-made munitions account for a significant percentage of the tonnage dropped on Gaza since October 2023. But it is not only the bombs that are made in America; it is also the architecture of digital torture. Israeli spyware like NSO Group's Pegasus, used to infiltrate the devices of journalists, activists, and ordinary civilians, is modelled after American systems like XKeyscore, developed by the National Security Agency (NSA) and revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 (Greenwald, 2014). The epistemic violence inflicted through this surveillance is not a byproduct of war—it is a tech export. As Loewenstein (2023) and Zureik (2016) have shown, the Israeli security model is marketed globally as a tested framework for pacification and control.

Israeli intelligence has drawn heavily on its partnership with the NSA, including joint operations and data-sharing programs that have shaped both the theory and practice of twenty-first-century cyberwarfare (Poitras, 2014). This collaboration reflects what one might call a "gain-of-function antagonism," wherein techniques of psychological domination are intensified through algorithmic refinement. Surveillance becomes a kind of neural weapon, probing for weaknesses and destabilising subjects from within. It maps not only what Palestinians do, but what they might think—and punishes accordingly.

This same logic is mirrored in America's own history of intelligence failure, particularly around 9/11. The 9/11 Commission Report notes that U.S. agencies failed to act on actionable intelligence, including tips from Mossad about potential hijackers. But what has often gone unexamined is how that lapse—intentional or otherwise—was politically useful. As critics observed after the attacks, the "new Pearl Harbor," enabled by 9/11, allowed for a global war on terror that expanded Israeli and American security goals in tandem (The Tablet, 2018). When the October 7 attacks in Israel were similarly preceded by ignored warnings, the déjà vu was chilling. In both cases, crisis became opportunity—and Gaza became a proving ground for a new kind of total war.

The United Kingdom and European Union, too, have been implicated in this export regime through arms sales, intelligence coordination, and facial recognition contracts (Privacy International, 2020). But Australia's role deserves scrutiny. As a member of the AUKUS pact, and home to the CIA's joint Pine Gap facility in the Northern Territory, Australia plays a strategic role in U.S. surveillance targeting throughout the Indo-Pacific, includ-

19 See Al-Jazeera (January 15, 2025).The human toll of Israel's war on Gaza – by the numbers. Retrieved on June 11, 2025 from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/15/the-human-toll-of-israels-war-on-gaza-by-the-numbers

20 See Fekih-Romdhane, F., Jebreen, K., Swaitti, T. et al. The indirect role of perceived survival expectations in the association between perceived hope and suicidal thoughts among palestinians amid war in Gaza. Sci Rep 14, 32035 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-83679-8

21 See Khatib, Salam. (2024). Suicidal Behavior in Palestine: Epidemiology, Risk Factors, and Prevention. 10.1007/978-981-97-2519-9_16.

22 Al Majalla (08 Oct 2023). Outbreak of war sheds light on Gaza's dire conditions and rising suicide rate. Retrieved on June 10, 2025 from https://en.majalla.com/node/301511/culture-social-affairs/outbreak-war-sheds-light-gazas-dire-conditions-and-rising

ing the Middle East. Pine Gap's geolocation and signals intelligence capabilities feed into real-time military operations.

Even more concerning is the metastasis of this model. As Loewenstein (2023) documents, Israeli surveillance expertise has been exported to authoritarian regimes in India, Myanmar, Hungary, the UAE, and Brazil. American companies—Palantir, Amazon Web Services, and Meta, among them—continue to refine these systems, using AI to fuse disparate data points into suspicion scores, which are then used to detain, flag, or kill preemptively.

This is not just a threat to Palestinians. It is a warning to all of us. The future of policing, border control, immigration enforcement, and public health surveillance is being beta-tested in Gaza. But the panopticon does not stop at the visual or spatial. Increasingly, its most potent mechanisms are auditory and affective. The voice, once the instrument of resistance, has become the surveillance state's newest frontier. What emerges is a terrifying innovation: the speech-enabled, disembodied interrogator.

Legal pathways

The Israeli surveillance apparatus in Gaza is not only a human rights crisis—it is a legal one. Under international humanitarian law, collective punishment, the targeting of civilians, and psychological torture all constitute grave breaches. Yet these violations persist, metastasising behind the shield of "security." The time for reckoning has come. Legal accountability must match the technological sophistication of the crimes.

One such pathway is the International Criminal Court (ICC), where proceedings on Israel's alleged war crimes are ongoing. Surveillance as torture, while not yet central in ICC jurisprudence, could be argued under Article 7 of the Rome Statute, which defines crimes against humanity to include persecution, inhumane acts, and other severe deprivations of liberty "intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health." If the systematic psychological assault through mass surveillance can be shown to cause measurable mental suffering—as this paper has argued—then it merits prosecutorial attention.

Another option is the principle of universal jurisdiction, as evoked in the South African case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Countries that recognise this principle can prosecute foreign nationals for grave breaches of international law, even without direct ties to the victims. This framework has precedent in cases of torture, including the arrest of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in London in 1998.

However, litigation alone cannot bear the burden of justice. Institutional accountability requires divestment, the withdrawal of public and private funds from companies and governments involved in the development or export of surveillance technologies used to commit human rights abuses. Universities, pension funds, and tech firms must be pressured to sever ties with systems of digital apartheid. The precedent exists: divestment was crucial to dismantling apartheid in South Africa, and it is a moral imperative now.

Limitations

This analysis operates within several constraints. War conditions limit independent verification of surveillance deployment scales and psychological impact measurements. Israeli military sources provide limited transparency regarding AI systems like Lavender and Blue Wolf, while Palestinian testimonies, though essential, may be challenging to corroborate independently. The study relies on NGO documentation, investigative journalism, and legal proceedings that reflect ongoing, contested claims. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of surveillance technology means some assessments may become outdated quickly.

Policy and research implications

These findings suggest an urgent need for international legal frameworks addressing digital surveillance as torture. Recommendations include: (1) establishing documentation standards for psychological harm from mass surveillance; (2) implementing safeguards around military AI targeting systems; (3) ensuring press access for independent investigation; (4) developing accountability mechanisms for surveillance technology exports; and (5) creating international monitoring bodies for digital rights in conflict zones. Future research should examine long-term psychological impacts through longitudinal studies and comparative analysis of surveillance regimes globally.

Conclusion

Israel's super-surveillance and censorship, and October 7 exploitation, add up to an integrated torture architecture (Abujidi, 2021). The US has helped inspire such form and function with its non-apologetic rendering of "enemy non-combatants" to black sites, including Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, where detainees have languished for two decades, in some cases, without being charged with a crime or seeing a day when they will be released. In many cases, detainees have been abused by guards in situations that can only be described as torture. Likewise, as the horrific doings at Abu Ghraib have shown, surveillance has been enhanced and used as a weapon to torture in ways that appeal to the growing number of so-called strongmen and their sadist enforcers. It is now possible, nay plausible, to imagine a near future where dissidents are taken away and fitted with technolo-

gy that installs a bespoke Abu Ghraib or Gitmo in their minds, interrogated by ChatGPT enforcers for the regime[23].

Netanyahu's call to kill monsters in the speech to Congress invokes the deepest themes of morality in the triumph of the rules and regulations and precepts that make culture and civilisation even possible, as Freud and many others have told us. We must fight monsters. And selfishness. One reads this and recalls what Nietzsche admonished us about: He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. Zionism's fusion of tribal chosenness and militarised trauma has birthed a supremacist logic: the oppressed become oppressors, not despite their history, but because of it.

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