

Blockade, Starvation, and Weaponization of Food: Synthesising Bare Life, State of Exception, and Biopolitics through Select Palestinian Poems

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Abstract

This research article examines the synthesising and contrasting repercussions of blockading and weaponizing food in the theoretical light of through Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, Carl Schmitt's theory of the sovereign decision, and Michel Foucault's account of biopolitics, with Palestinian poetry as the primary reference. The article argues that hunger in Palestinian literary discourse is not merely a humanitarian consequence of war but a deliberate political strategy employed to regulate, discipline, and control civilian populations. This article examines how Palestinian poetry represents starvation and blockade as instruments of political control, reading these representations. Drawing on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, and Hind Jouda, the study argues that the withholding of food functions simultaneously as a legal, political, and biological act of control, one that reduces civilian life to bare survival while remaining outside ordinary legal accountability. Particular attention is given to how hunger is shown to stultify language and memory, threatening the very capacity for testimony even as the poems themselves manage to give it voice. Comparative readings of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and scholarship on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Vanni situate the Palestinian case within a broader pattern in which sovereign power suspends legal protection under conditions of exception. The article contends that these poems do more than document suffering: they resist the erasure that blockade seeks to impose, affirming what Judith Butler calls the demand that precarious lives be recognized as grievable.

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Giorgio Agamben discusses Carl Schmitt's *State of Exception* and Michel Foucault's Biopolitics in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Agamben), written in 1995. He distinguishes between "Bios," which means a political life marked by dignity, rights, and recognition, whereas "Zoē" is mere biological existence, stripped of rights. This distinction is foundational to Agamben's argument, since it marks the line between those who count as full members of a community and those merely permitted to exist. *Bare Life or nuda vita* (Agamben 8) refers to a condition in which a human life is reduced to existence only, with no political or legal rights. This happens in spaces of exception such as camps, prisons, sieges, and carceral geographies, where law is in a suspended state, and people live only as "survivors," not citizens. Refugees are often denied citizenship, legal recognition, and rights. They live in cramped spaces and make shift arrangements, which Agamben calls "Zones of Indistinction" (Agamben 37). "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 5). The sovereign authority or state decides when and how rules of normal life (including access to food and aid) are suspended.

Food can thus be withheld "exceptionally" under the justification of security or war. In siege conditions, civilians are starved not because of a normal law, but because of the exceptional sovereign decision. In *The History of Sexuality*, (Foucault 142) Foucault demonstrates that modern power is not just about "making people die" but also about "making people live." The states manage populations by exerting power through regulations pertaining to health, birth, illness, and nourishment. "Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects . . . but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself" (Foucault 142). Food supply, hunger prevention, and rationing are essential tenets of "Biopolitics." Forced starvation through blockading or restriction of food is a means of exercising power over life. Read together, Agamben, Schmitt, and Foucault provide a shared vocabulary for understanding how the denial of food operates simultaneously as a legal, political, and biological act of control.

Restriction of movement through a blockade effected by the Israeli authorities over the besieged Gaza enclave, has been in place for so long. It has intensified since 2023. Samih al-Qasim's *Travel Tickets* evokes restrictions on movement and resources, in which Palestinians are denied normal rights. Food, water, and travel permits exist only at the mercy of authority. "The day I'm killed, my killer, rifling through my pockets, will find travel tickets: One to peace . . ." (Al-Qasim 58-59). It can be argued that starvation and restriction are imposed not as natural decisions but as "Decisions of Exception" that deliberately suspend normal life. These lines capture the forced denial of movement that results in the disruption of essential supplies. Still, the speaker wants his "killer" to take the tickets and travel and

experience virtual human experiences such as peace and conscience using the tickets. The poem, thusly, turns an instrument of control, the travel permit, into a symbol of everything that has been taken away, so that the very document meant to restrict Palestinian movement becomes, in the speaker's imagination, a means of reclaiming what the blockade denies.

The sovereign decides when law is suspended, giving rise to a "State of Exception." Under occupation or blockade, humanitarian law gets suspended, justifying starvation. Severe restrictions on imports/exports and goods have led to the collapse or severe impairment of agriculture, manufacturing, infrastructure, and healthcare (Cali & Miaari, 140). Food insecurity is widespread in Gaza, with most residents relying on humanitarian aid while many essential items for daily life remain unavailable (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Al Mezan Center for Human Rights). The health system in Gaza is severely stressed, marked by shortages of medicines, medical equipment, and hospital fuel, as well as the inability to evacuate or refer certain patients outside the Strip (Batniji et al.,; Al Mezan Center for Human Rights). In contrast, Mahmoud Darwish's poem *A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies* (1967) stages an imaginary situation in which the enemy soldier gets tired of killing Palestinians and yearns to conjoin cultural rituals with Palestinians, such as having coffee together. These conditions illustrate how the suspension of normal legal protections translates into concrete deprivation, confirming Agamben's claim that bare life is produced through ordinary administrative and military decisions rather than through extraordinary violence alone. Darwish writes:

I dream of white lilies, streets of song, a house of light. I need a kind heart, not a bullet. I need a bright day, not a mad, fascist moment of triumph. I need a child to cherish a day of laughter, not a weapon of war.... Homeland for him, he said, is to drink my mother's coffee, to return safely at nightfall. (Darwish)

Darwish uses coffee as a metaphor of life and invites the enemy soldiers to recognize humanity through culture. In reality, starvation/blockade is being used as a weapon, which is in contrast with literary situations that picture the futility of war. The soldier's longing for an ordinary domestic ritual suggests that even those enforcing a siege remain capable of recognizing the humanity of the people they are ordered to harm, a recognition that state policy actively works to suppress.

Foucault's "*Biopolitics*" addresses the regulation of life through food, hunger, and health. By controlling nourishment, authorities can simultaneously exert control over existence itself. Mahmoud Darwish's "*The State of Siege*" (2002) describes how bread, coffee, and olive oil become symbols of resistance. The poem records how even basic food is politicized. Food embodies the everyday struggle to "make live" or "let die." The siege turns food into a biopolitical tool; survival itself becomes an act of defiance. In this sense, the simple act of preparing coffee or pressing olives becomes charged with political meaning, since continuing an everyday domestic practice under siege quietly refuses the logic that would reduce Palestinian life to

bare survival. Darwish notes:

Our cups of coffee. Birds, green trees, in the blue shade; the sun gambols from one wall to another like a gazelle. The water in the clouds has the unlimited shape of what is left to us of the sky. And other things of suspended memories reveal that this morning is powerful and splendid, and that we are the guests of eternity. (Darwish)

The cups of coffee, birds, trees, and sunlight are not just ordinary images but metaphorical symbols of the steadfastness of life under conditions of exception (Agamben). Even when sovereignty strips Palestinians of their basic rights and reduces them to “bare life,” they insist on maintaining cultural rituals that assert their humanity. “Birds” are metaphors for freedom and transcendence, resisting confinement and blockade. “Trees” are used as metaphors for a deep-rooted connection to the land, reflecting Palestinian attachment to olive trees and soil despite the imposed dispossession. Read together, these images construct a counter-archive of ordinary life, one that insists on beauty and continuity even as external forces attempt to reduce existence to mere biological survival.

Wheat is a staple food that symbolizes sustenance and life. Its absence reflects the collapse of the food supply system due to blockade and restricted imports. Jouda writes, “I want to bake a loaf of bread but there’s no wheat in the fields. There is only a dilapidated scarecrow Scaring the peasants, but not the crow” (Jouda). The scarecrow, meant to protect crops, is ineffective, highlighting the futility of local efforts under external constraints. At times of food scarcity, Palestinians are forced to step into precarious situations – food/aid distribution zones, where they are mercilessly shot down. Jenisha and Boopathi explore place attachment and identity among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Vanni. “In Vanni, the disjunctive sequencing and affective layering of refugee movement create a volatile spatial matrix where zones of safety and zones of death overlap” (Jenisha and Boopathi). Refugees and besieged populations are reduced to bare life (*nuda vita*), existing in zones of indistinction (neither fully protected nor fully destroyed). Hind Jouda describes how Palestinians survive on rationed food, unable to escape or to live fully. Olive trees, bread, and salt are more than sustenance; they mark existence reduced to survival, and pursuit of food ends life miserably. Camps and blockades become Agamben’s “camps” – zones where Palestinians have a suspended existence between life and death. The comparison with Vanni is instructive, since it shows that the reduction of displaced populations to bare life is not unique to Gaza but recurs wherever sovereign power suspends ordinary legal protection in the name of security.

“Tonight, and tomorrow and every night so long as there is need, I will not hunger any more” (Markandaya) registers Rukmani’s resilience in the milieu of poverty and scarcity in post-independence rural India. Whether in the face of rural poverty or forced blockade, hunger dehumanizes and destroys dignity. Hunger stagnates not just physical activity but also intellectual and creative activity,

highlighting how deprivation constrains human expression resulting in stultification. Markandaya's novel, written decades before the current situation in Gaza, suggests that the link between hunger and the erosion of dignity is not confined to one region or period, but recurs wherever poverty or policy denies people reliable access to food. Maarouf writes:

What's the point of writing if I can't feel full? What's the point of memory if I can't access it? What's the point of living if every day is just a failed attempt to secure a meal that doesn't resemble food? (Maarouf)

Spiritual fasting is a voluntary abstention from taking food, drinks, or other pleasures undertaken for religious, ethical, or personal growth purposes. It is done to enhance spirituality and ethical discipline (Durkheim). In contrast, forced starvation is involuntary and imposed externally so as to exert control, punishment, and oppression over refugees. It results in survival under coercion (Agamben). Starvation can be rendered contextually as a biopolitical technique through which occupying powers regulate life and death to maintain authority over populations (Foucault). The blockade in Gaza, as highlighted in Palestinian poetry, records one of the various strangulating strategies adopted by the sovereign, where access to food is restricted as part of a broader system of control. The distinction matters because it clarifies what is at stake: fasting affirms a person's control over their own body, while forced starvation removes that control entirely and places it in the hands of an external authority.

Foucault's "*Biopolitics*" explains how authority exercises power by regulating populations, not just through laws but through the management of life, including movement. Collective hunger refers to situations where entire communities or populations suffer hunger simultaneously. In the Palestinian context, hunger as a weapon is wielded against the vulnerable, not as isolated incidents, but as a systemic condition in the forms of famine under siege, starvation due to blockade, and refugee camps. In Gaza, hunger is a deliberately produced condition that affects the whole population, resulting in malnutrition. This distinguishes collective hunger from famine caused by drought or crop failure, since the scarcity described here follows directly from policy decisions about what is allowed to enter the territory. Maarouf writes:

You die alone in hunger. You break down spiritually. The presence of other hungry people offers no comfort; on the contrary, when hunger becomes collective, you know that every hand around you is cut off. No one can help. How can I write about this? (Maarouf)

Hussam Maarouf in his poem "*Hunger That Defeats Language*" portrays starvation in Gaza as more than physical deprivation and shows it as something that stultifies and destroys memory. It nullifies the very capacity of Gazans to even narrate suffering. This passage can be interpreted as a staging of Agamben's "bare life" where life is crushed down to its biological rock bottom, where it is reduced to the impossibility of eating. Hunger dismantles the nexus between language and

memory, resulting in the impossibility of representation itself. From Foucault's perspective on biopolitics, hunger here is not an accidental crisis but a controlled one, deployed as a political technique through which life is managed through starvation. By regulating food distribution, the authorities exercise power "to make live and let die." Maarouf's line, "every hand around you is cut off," demonstrates how the blockade produces social atomization, and hunger fragments the collective body, preventing solidarity. From a phenomenological angle, collective hunger (Husserl) puts the refugees together through a shared physical vulnerability. Even so, Maarouf's poem resists any comforting idea that shared suffering automatically produces solidarity, since the speaker insists that hunger isolates individuals from one another even as it is experienced collectively.

Finally, from Schmitt's perspective, the sovereign decision to restrict the supply of food designates Gaza as a zone of exception where normal rights and protections are in a suspended state. Starvation becomes a controlled crisis in the hands of the sovereign, not a natural disaster. Maarouf's voice catches the anguish of being trapped in this suspended state. Maarouf thus demonstrates how collective hunger functions as a weaponized condition, where the body is turned into a battlefield. The inability to narrate hunger ("How can I write about this?") is itself a consequence of biopolitical control that extinguishes and consumes all the energy needed for survival, making language collapse. This silence here is not natural but imposed, which reflects Agamben's *nuda vita*, Foucault's biopower, and Schmitt's sovereign "decision of exception." Taken together, these three frameworks show that the silence produced by hunger is not a gap in the historical record but a form of evidence in itself, pointing to the deliberate withdrawal of the conditions that make speech and memory possible.

The study has demonstrated how Palestinian poetry consistently foregrounds the themes of starvation, blockade, and weaponization of food as core to the real-time experience under occupation and siege. In the works of Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, Hussam Maarouf, and Hind Jouda, food and hunger are used not simply as literary concepts but as concrete realities that validate the systematic deprivation encountered under siege. These poems stage how forced starvation (as a controlled crisis) and restricted access to basic needs are used as weapons of oppression and as recurring dominant themes through which poets demonstrate resistance, memory, and identity. In this view, literary creations serve as crucial documents that record the anguish of the silenced. Read together, these poems form a body of testimony that documents what official reports often summarize in statistics alone.

The theoretical frameworks of Giorgio Agamben, Carl Schmitt, and Michel Foucault are further synthesized into these literary renditions to reach meaningful inferences. Agamben's concept of "bare life" interprets how hunger reduces individuals to mere biological existence. Schmitt's notion of the "sovereign decision" underscores that such a crisis is not natural but politically staged through the logic of "exception." Foucault's analysis of "biopolitics" explains how the controlled food

supply, the perverse management of scarcity, and the orchestration of collective hunger function as techniques of power used by the sovereign to regulate life itself. These frameworks, interwoven, enable a closer and deeper reading of Palestinian poetry, placing its representations of hunger in the scope of a broader philosophical realm of power, sovereignty, and survival. Poetry provides a clear spectacle of the ordeals undergone by the refugees, which were often obscured by the mainstream media and politics. Literature serves as a space where the silence created through starvation is transformed into witness-statements. This synthesis suggests that literary and theoretical language need not be treated as separate registers, since poetry can articulate the lived texture of bare life in ways that theoretical prose, on its own, cannot fully capture.

The forced starvation captured in Palestinian poetry should not be understood only as a natural consequence of a blockade, but must be rendered as a grave violation of human rights. The Fourth Geneva Convention unambiguously denounces the forceful starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, and human rights observers have characterized the ongoing siege as enacting precisely this practice (Geneva Convention). Human Rights Watch (2020) has further documented how the controlled flow of aid and relief in Gaza places the health and daily survival of civilians on a precarious stage. In this context, the poetry of Samih Al Qasim, Mahmoud Darwish, Hussam Maarouf, or Hind Jouda resonates as ethical witness-statements, ratifying Judith Butler's (2004) claim that precarious lives demand recognition. Understood in this light, the poems examined here do more than describe suffering: they insist that the lives being starved are worth grieving, and in doing so they resist the very erasure that blockade and siege seek to impose.

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