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“WE RUN TO TELL A DIFFERENT STORY”
Exercising with the Right to Movement Community in a
Militarised, Settler-Colonial Context

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ABSTRACT

Stine Mark Rasmussen: “We Run to Tell a Different Story”: Exercising with the Right to Movement Community in a Militarised, Settler-Colonial Context
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This thesis explores how the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context can be understood through exercise practices, and how the effects of living in such a context may be navigated through exercise. It explores this objective through interviews with six Palestinians who exercise and participate in the Right to Movement community in Bethlehem, to understand their lived, everyday experiences. Using a Feminist Peace Research methodology and applying reflexive thematic analysis to the interview data, this research finds that exercising as an everyday practice gains value beyond the ordinary when carried out in this extraordinary setting. Furthermore, this thesis engages with decolonial feminist ideas to argue why lived, everyday experiences of war and violence matter and proposes ways to challenge and transform the existing Western-dominated systems and structures that sustain violence and suppression.

The analysis concludes that exercising in this setting is a complex, multilayered, powerful practice of agency and control. Their experiences reveal that exercising operates between the everyday and the extraordinary, highlighting its flexibility and how its significance and symbolic value vary according to the socio-political and specific spatio-temporal settings in which it is practised. As the participants insist on preserving and caring for their bodies, as well as displaying Palestinian identity through their exercise practices, it is used as a creative mode of expression and transformation. Despite the occupation, exercising helps them achieve a sense of freedom, altering feelings of worry and anger into joy and empowerment. This demonstrates the powerful role of exercise as a means of taking control of one's body and agency regarding how they encounter the militarised, settler-colonial context they live in. Furthermore, the Right to Movement community utilises exercise to take control of and change the narrative, to tell a different story.

This thesis argues that we need such stories to understand war and violence as corporeal, lived experiences, and that these experiences should be at the centre of how we analyse, discuss, and formulate foreign policy on war and conflicts. However, this fundamental change requires not just a change of approach but a shift in paradigm and a radical change in how we understand our interconnectedness and responsibility toward one another. I argue that decolonial feminist ideas of collective responsibility, ethics of care, and solidarity are needed to make this shift and break the ongoing cycle of violence.

Keywords: Palestine, settler-colonialism, exercise, lived experiences, feminist peace research, decolonial feminism.

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DISCLAIMER:

The author is entirely responsible for the content and views presented in this thesis. The Right to Movement community and the individual participants are not responsible for any of the analytical conclusions, opinions expressed, or ethical standpoints presented in this research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	1
1. INTRODUCTION.....	2
2. SPORTS, FEMINIST PEACE RESEARCH AND THE EVERYDAY IN PALESTINE CHARACTERISED BY RESISTANCE	5
2.1 SPORTS AND EXERCISE IN PEACE AND CONFLICT RESEARCH	6
2.2 FEMINIST PEACE RESEARCH	8
2.2.1 LIVED AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCES OF PEACE, WAR AND VIOLENCE	11
2.2.2 THE EVERYDAY AND CONTINUUMS OF VIOLENCE	12
2.3 THE EVERYDAY AND EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS WITH VIOLENCE IN THE OPT	14
2.3.1 <i>Militarised Settler-colonialism</i>	14
2.3.2 <i>The Everyday in a Militarised, Settler-Colonial Context</i>	16
3. HISTORICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND.....	20
3.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	21
3.2 CURRENT SITUATION IN THE WEST BANK	26
3.3 BETHLEHEM AND THE RIGHT TO MOVEMENT COMMUNITY	28
4. DATA, METHODS, AND METHODOLOGY	33
4.1 DATA COLLECTION: INTERVIEWS AND SUPPORTING PHOTOGRAPHS	33
4.2 DATA ANALYSIS	37
4.3 METHODOLOGY	40
4.3.1 <i>Researcher Positionality</i>	41
4.3.2 <i>Ethical Considerations and Limitations</i>	43
5. ANALYSIS.....	47
5.1 THEME 1: A SPECIAL EXERCISE COMMUNITY FOR ALL	47
5.1.2 <i>A Diverse and Liberal Community</i>	49
5.1.3 <i>Opportunities for Personal Development in a Flexible but Consistent Community</i>	51
5.1.4 <i>An Accessible Alternative</i>	53
5.1.5 <i>The Empowerment of Community and Connecting Palestinians Through Exercise</i>	53
5.2 THEME 2: EXERCISING AS PRACTISING FREEDOM UNDER OCCUPATION	55
5.2.1 <i>Long and Short-term Effects of Exercising in a Difficult Situation</i>	55
5.2.2 <i>Control and Agency: Transforming Mind and Body</i>	58
5.3 THEME 3: ACCESSING AND MOVING IN NATURE: AN AMBIVALENT, MULTILAYERED EXPERIENCE.....	59
5.3.1 <i>Breathing and Suffocating Simultaneously</i>	60
5.3.2 <i>Immediate and Unpredictable Barriers and Dangers</i>	63
5.3.3 <i>Risk Assessment – Danger vs. Principle</i>	64
5.4 THEME 4: MOVING WITH SYMBOLIC BODIES – DISPLAYING AND CLAIMING ‘PALESTINIANISM’ DESPITE ATTEMPTS OF ELIMINATION.....	67
5.4.1 <i>Embodied and Social Experiences of a Suppressed Identity</i>	67
5.4.2 <i>Mobility Restrictions, Exercise and Resistance</i>	69
5.4.3 <i>Landscapes, Location, and Symbolic (Re)Claims of Palestinian Identity</i>	72
5.5 THEME 5: “A WINDOW OF HOPE AND LIGHT” – THE CAPACITY OF THE RTM COMMUNITY.....	75
5.5.1 <i>Expressions of Resistance and Sumūd</i>	75

5.5.2 “We Run to Tell a Different Story”	79
5.5.3 Challenging Boundaries Internally and Externally	81
5.6 CONCLUSION OF ANALYSIS	84
5.6.1 Primary Research Question 1	84
5.6.2 Primary Research Question 2	86
6. DISCUSSION.....	90
6.1 THE ILLUSION OF AN ISOLATED ‘WEST’ AND DIVERTED RESPONSIBILITY.....	90
6.2 NUANCING VIOLENCE/WAR AND CENTRING EMBODIED, LIVED AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES.....	92
6.3 EXPOSING AND CHALLENGING SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES OF THE WEST	94
6.4 TAKING RESPONSIBILITY AND CREATING JUST FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY.....	96
7. CONCLUSION.....	101
LIST OF REFERENCES	107
APPENDICES	120
APPENDIX I: MAPS AND GEOGRAPHICAL ILLUSTRATIONS	120
APPENDIX II: LIST OF INTERVIEWS.....	123
APPENDIX III: PRE-FORMULATED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	124
APPENDIX IV: THE RIGHT TO MOVEMENT T-SHIRT.....	125

List of Abbreviations

FPR	Feminist Peace Research
ICC	International Criminal Court
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OCJ	International Court of Justice
oPt	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PA	Palestinian Authority
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
RTM	Right to Movement
SDP	Sport for Development and Peacebuilding
TA	Thematic Analysis
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WB	The West Bank
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction

In Palestine, exercising and moving your body from one place to another has a different meaning and significance than in most other places. Physical activity and forms of exercise are understood to play an important role when it comes to mental and physical health (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2022). Likewise, the WHO considers the availability and accessibility of green and open nature spaces to be important factors for improving health and general well-being, in part as facilitating space for exercise and social interaction (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2022). Yet, in a militarised, settler-colonial context, exercising and moving in outdoor spaces is about more than health and general well-being. By understanding lived experiences of exercising in such a context, this thesis aims to contribute to a feminist conceptualisation of war and violence as lived and corporeal experiences, while it simultaneously takes a critical and decolonial position towards current approaches and understandings of war and violence.

My first meeting with the Right to Movement community in Bethlehem, Palestine – and my own ‘exercise-privilege’ – was in October 2022. Participating in the activities of the Right to Movement community triggered one of many confronting eye-openers during my visit to Palestine. It was not just a meeting with my mobility privilege, which allows me access and rights to exercise in natural spaces safely and peacefully; it was also an encounter with a very special community, one that I experienced as inclusive, filled with hope, joy, energy, solidarity, and support for one another. This thesis is inspired by my experience with this community, but it is motivated by the realisation that the experiences of the Palestinians exercising as part of this community are important to understand. Based on pre-existing definitions and terminology, they live in what I define as a militarised, settler-colonial context and engage in everyday activities, such as exercising, in an environment characterised by different types of colonial violence (Griffiths & Joronen, 2023). In this context, exercising and moving in natural spaces is not without barriers, figuratively and literally.

As feminist approaches to peace and conflict studies have highlighted, without understanding the everyday experience of war and conflict, we cannot possibly grasp the complex nature of these phenomena that are so dominant in our world (Mackenzie & Wegener, 2021). A feminist approach argues that violence and wars must be understood and analysed not merely as involving ‘imagined’ bodies, such as states or international institutions, and examined not just from a strategic, loss-gain perspective. Rather, war and violence are experienced by living, human bodies, whose experiences and stories are important sources of knowledge that help nuance and unfold the complexities of war, peace, and violence

(Mackenzie & Wegener, 2021; Björkdal & Selimovic, 2023; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Through interviews with six Palestinians who exercise as part of the Right to Movement community in Bethlehem, this thesis contributes to making the unknown everyday experiences of living in a militarised, settler-colonial setting known.

Their lived, embodied experience of exercising and moving in this space is a source of unique knowledge not only about the context itself but also about intersecting violences and human responses to it, such as resilience, resistance, solidarity, and community, and how these are formed through exercise. Firstly, examining their lived experiences in a militarised, settler-colonial context reveals important insights about everyday life in this spatial setting. Secondly, understanding how various reactions and emotional responses are intertwined and emerge from these experiences offers valuable knowledge on how colonial violence is navigated, resisted, and unmade, as well as the potential role of exercise in this process. Moreover, this thesis aims to draw on this knowledge for a critical engagement with the dominant ‘Western’ systems and structures that enable Israel’s settler-colonial project to continue. In that sense, rather than simply presenting and interpreting accounts of lived experiences of exercising in this context, I draw inspiration from decolonial feminist peace research in critically addressing these aspects and exploring how the findings of this study challenge them.

Thus, the research aim can be divided into a primary and secondary purpose. Guided by a feminist orientation and methodology, this thesis primarily aims to understand the role of exercise by centring individual narratives and experiences of Palestinians from the Right to Movement community in Bethlehem. The secondary purpose of this study is inspired by critical and decolonial feminism, which encourages critical engagement and a transformative, normative approach to challenging dominant understandings and knowledge systems (Mackenzie & Wegener, 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). For clarity, the following section explains how the two purposes will be addressed in practice.

The primary purpose, which contains two research objectives, is to *firstly, explore how the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context can be understood through the practice of exercise, and secondly, how the effects of living in such a context are navigated through the act of exercising with Right to Movement*. Based on this, I divide the primary purpose into the following two questions and sub-questions to support them:

1. *How can the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context be understood through the practice of exercise?*

- How do their individual experiences show a disruption in the everydayness of the act of exercising?

- In what way does the socio-political and spatio-temporal context influence the participants' experience of exercising?

2. *How are the effects of living in this context navigated through the act of exercising with Right to Movement?*

- Which recurring motivations, effects and feelings appear from their stories as central to their lived experience of exercising?
- How do these elements entangle and show how Palestinians 'encounter' the militarised, settler-colonial context that they live and exercise in?

The primary research purpose and the above research questions and sub-questions will be addressed in the analysis section. In the subsequent discussion section, I address the secondary research purpose. The secondary research purpose can be formulated as follows: *to explore what happens when you expose the oppressive structures and systems of the 'Western world,' which transcend to dominate international structures and systems, to the lived experiences presented in this research?* In this sense, the discussion serves to bridge the findings of the analysis with the secondary research purpose identified above and connect the lived experiences with critical, decolonial feminist ideas and perspectives on dismantling violence-enabling systems and structures, instead fostering a culture of peace.

This introduction has presented my inspiration for this study, explained its relevance, and defined the research purposes. It has explained how these aims will be pursued by formulating a primary and a secondary purpose, outlining how they will be addressed in practice. The remaining structure of the thesis will take the following shape: After the introduction, the chapter 'Sports, Feminist Peace Research and the Everyday in Palestine Characterised by Resistance' will take the reader through existing research on sports and exercise within the field of peace and conflict research. It will also present core ideas of feminist peace research, such as corporeality and continuums of violence, and introduce existing approaches to researching and understanding the everyday and everyday encounters of violence in the context of Palestine. After this, I introduce the data and data collection process and account for my research methods and methodological framework. The thesis then moves on to the analysis section, where I apply a reflexive thematic analysis to my data. Following this, the discussion will engage the findings with a feminist decolonial critique of 'Western' (from here on used without quotation marks) systems and structures. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the findings, offer reflections on the research, suggest further research objectives and point to potential contributions of such objectives.

2. Sports, Feminist Peace Research and the Everyday in Palestine Characterised by Resistance

This chapter sketches out existing literature to gain a deeper understanding of the preexisting research, theoretical orientation, and empirical observations related to the topic of this thesis. I first examine how sports and exercise have been studied in relation to peace and conflict research and explore different conceptualisations emerging from such studies. Although the broader topic of sports and exercise in peace and conflict research is less significant than Feminist Peace Research (FPR) and the everyday in establishing the theoretical framework of this paper, it is presented first to demonstrate a gap that I argue can be filled by FPR, which is introduced in the second section. After a general introduction to FPR, I focus specifically on the body as a site of knowledge from a FPR perspective. I then move on to the everyday and the different types of violence that arise from examining the everyday aspect of conflict as conceptualised by FPR. Lastly, I introduce the conceptualisation of the everyday in the oPt as taking place in a militarised, settler-colonial context and present different perspectives on how the everyday setting has been studied in this context. However, before starting this chapter, I make two important comments about the upcoming sections below.

Firstly, an introduction to the differences between sport, exercise, and physical activity is necessary to clarify the terminology throughout this thesis. Physical activity is an umbrella term for all kinds of movement that result in increased amounts of energy used by the body. Exercise can be understood as a specific type of physical activity performed purposefully and in a structured manner, for the sake of being physically active and improving health. Sport, then, refers to physical activity often conducted for competitive purposes, where the activity follows established rules and structures, and is often facilitated by formal institutions such as sports clubs and organisations (Pink, 2008). I refer to the activities of RTM as ‘exercise’ because they do physical activity – primarily running, hiking, and muscle-strengthening workouts – purposefully and in a structured manner. While some may practice running for competitive purposes, it is not as such the goal of the community to enhance their competitiveness, although it may be an individual aim for some participants. Furthermore, they are not a formal institution, and they do not practice rule-based sports. However, when I initiate the first section focusing on sports, it is because this type of institutionalised, more ‘public’ aspect of physical activity has been more extensively researched thus far, in comparison to informal exercise practices.

Secondly, when reading the forthcoming sections on FPR, note that it is presented according to the ideals of FPR. Despite its advocacy for decolonial approaches and its aims to practice inclusivity, solidarity, and intersectionality, FPR (and feminist theory in general) remains exclusionary and has received criticism for still being dominated by (white) Western feminism and Western epistemologies (see e.g. Mohanty, 2003, pp. 17-42; Elia, 2017; Väyrynen et al., 2021, pp. 1-6; Pratt et al., 2025). I point this out to avoid a glorification of FPR and to clarify that I am aware of these tensions and hypocritical tendencies within certain strands of feminism.

2.1 Sports and Exercise in Peace and Conflict Research

Since the 1970s and 1980s, sports have been considered by anthropologists as a meaningful site of studying societies and cultures, representing a place of producing and reproducing meaning-making, cultural expression, and behaviour (Ferriter, 2017). Since then, sports have also been examined from various angles within the field of peace and conflict studies and other closely related disciplines. For instance, it is widely recognised that sport can serve as a tool for peace mediation in conflict (e.g., Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2021), and research has demonstrated how sport has served to maintain connections between conflicting societies (e.g., Vonnard et al., 2018). Books such as *the Routledge Handbook of Sport for Development and Peace* (Collison et al., 2019) and *Sport and Peace-Building in Divided Societies: Playing with Enemies* (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017) cover these topics extensively, addressing how sport is now recognised as a tool for social and economic development as well as conflict resolution. The Sport for Development and Peacebuilding (SDP) umbrella term has been coined to describe related initiatives.

A relevant example of SDP in the context of Palestine is the “Football 4 Peace” project. It was implemented, among other places, in Israel as a means of promoting peaceful coexistence and understanding between Jewish and Arab youth (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017). However, this project has faced criticism in this context for its implicit ‘normalisation’ and legitimisation of Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine, which also reveals the complexities and challenges of using sports as a tool for conflict resolution and development (Abulhawa, 2023). A different example can be drawn from the Skatepal project, which has built skateparks and helps Palestinians learn how to skate across the West Bank. In comparison to the Football 4 Peace initiative, Abulhawa (2023) describes the Skatepal project as adjacent to SDP in the sense that rather than building bridges between Israelis and Palestinian, Skatepal “enacts a form of solidarity through being with Palestinian communities, and by inviting skateboarders to visit,

which subtly challenges the political architectures of separation that are manifested in Israel's separation wall” (p. 199). In this sense, Abulhawa (2023) draws attention to bottom-up approaches and a decolonization of SDP initiatives and shows how the Skatepal project upholds an anti-normalisation stance.

Another relevant approach to the study of sport concerning peace and conflict is on its role as a political tool, such as through boycotting and banning certain countries from international sports organisations (Budd, 2001; Allison, 2004). A related concept of ‘sports diplomacy’ has been coined by sports politics scholars (Gilchrist & Holden, 2011). The Olympic Games, in particular, have always been an arena for such politics, and sports are now understood as a site for exercising ‘soft power’ (for example, Nygård & Gates, 2013; Ren et al., 2019). Similarly, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022 sparked much political debate globally around topics such as human rights and the political neutrality of major ‘Sports Governing Bodies’ (Such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee) (Grix & James, 2024). Upon accounting for ways in which such bodies have engaged in politics and how governments have involved themselves in sports, Grix and James (2024) argue that “sports has always been political” (p. 70). They also highlight another important point, which is that the relationship between war and sports extends far back in history. Many methods for improving physical fitness used today can be traced back to those employed when training men for battle in Sparta, and with this came the realisation that physical fitness is beneficial in a country’s defence forces (Grix & James, 2024). However, this body of research engaging with the sports and politics nexus is mainly concerned with elite-level sports and nationalised competitions, not fully recognising the political potential of non-professional, everyday practices of sports and exercise.

One way in which informal, non-professional, everyday practices have been studied is as a means of resistance to political oppression. Such research has shown how sports can be used to express resistance, even in its small-scale, everyday form, organised in local and informal settings. Many previous case studies have examined sports-based resistance in local everyday settings as well as in publicly organised sports practices. Case studies have explored the phenomenon in various periods and contexts, such as communist Czechoslovakia (Numerato, 2009), the Soviet Union (Edelman, 2002), Korea under Japan’s colonial rule (Ok, 2005), and India, in its use of cricket as resistance against British Imperialism (Majumdar, 2002). While these examples make use of a less defined conceptualisation of resistance, they are also mainly based on historical sources, and in each of these contexts, resistance takes different forms and is expressed with varying levels of public visibility.

As the field of resistance studies has developed, many different conceptualisations have been framed, leading to a broader understanding of what can be considered resistance. For example, Johannson & Vinthagen (2019) have conducted extensive research on ‘everyday resistance,’ which they suggest a *tentative* definition of as “resistance that is done routinely (as patterns of acts), but which is not politically articulated in public or formally organized (in that situation)” (2019, p. 31). While this conceptualisation focuses on the everyday aspects of resistance and recognises that everyday resistance can take many forms and be articulated with varying degrees of consciousness (Johannson & Vinthagen, 2019), the idea of ‘embodied resistance’ has emerged to highlight the significance of the body during acts of resistance. Lilja (2017) describes how assemblies of resisting bodies and the material surroundings reciprocally affect each other and produce symbolic significance. Furthermore, she points out how emotions influence such embodied ‘performances’ and move between people, thus impacting the individual-collective dynamic. It is through this doing of emotions that communities are formed, collectively disrupting and challenging the oppressor’s logic and normative status quo through an embodied performance, as “they indicate agency and a mode of resistance, subversive standpoints and eruptive views” (Lilja, 2017, p. 247).

While such conceptualisations of resistance could also encompass sports and exercise practices in some form, it is acknowledged that sports as an embodied act of everyday resistance have until now been neglected within the field (Isard, Melton & Macaulay, 2023). Furthermore, other types of exercise that are not formalised to the extent that they are categorised as sports fall outside the focus of previous research. Thus, while past studies have illustrated the connection between sports and politics, diplomacy, conflict resolution, and resistance, the embodied element of exercising in a conflict-affected or violent setting has largely been overlooked by previous research. It is on this note that I turn to FRP, which argues that the body and lived embodied experiences are important sites of knowledge.

2.2 Feminist Peace Research

Feminist engagements with matters of war and peace extend far back in history through practical work, activism, and knowledge production (Confortini, 2010; Wibben, 2016; Lyytikäinen et al., 2021; Wibben, 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021). The Western International Women’s Peace Organisation (WILPF) was established in 1915 (Confortini, 2012), and although non-Western contributions have long been overlooked in the field, scholars are now researching and recognising feminist contributions from previously marginalised perspectives. In their revision of a genealogy of FPR, Lyytikäinen et al. (2021), for example, include both

indigenous knowledge of the Sámi people, literature published in colonial India, the work of the Nepalese feminist thinker Yogmaya Neupane, and the contributions of Elise Boulding and Berenice Carroll, who played a major role in developing Western (feminist) peace research. Today, FPR engages with diverse strands of feminism, including black, indigenous, decolonial, and environmental feminism (Väyrynen et al., 2021). Not all feminists, or feminist ideas and movements, proclaimed themselves as such in their time, even though we consider them so today. Regardless of the level to which such individuals and movements were consciously feminist, they contributed to the development of the FPR field.

FPR as an academic field has developed over time, but scholarly interest in it increased from the mid-1970s through the 1980s (Wibben, 2021). Since then, FPR has established itself as an innovative and increasingly influential academic field that challenges conventional understandings of core concepts such as violence and power (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Féron and Väyrynen (2024) write that:

[...] historically, feminism as an academic field and as a social movement has emerged out of women's experiences of oppression. Therefore, feminism is normative and aims at social change [...]. Nowadays, most strands of feminism aim explicitly at the emancipation not just of women but of all oppressed individuals regardless of their gender. (p. 1)

Thus, emancipation and the ending of oppression form the very foundation and working purpose of FPR. Having evolved into both an academic field and a methodology, it serves as a relevant tool to highlight not only oppressive gendered structures but all intersecting experiences of marginalisation and oppression (Väyrynen et al., 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). FPR has denied the generalisation that all women are by nature peaceful in contrast to men, who are seen as inherently violent, and nuanced the gendered ideas of peace and violence. Furthermore, FPR is concerned not only with gender but with all harmful hierarchies and structures; it addresses various issues, such as colonialism, racism, environmental injustice, and capitalism (e.g., in Mackenzie & Wegener, 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). FPR represents a diverse and multidisciplinary approach to the study of war and peace, and it overlaps with fields such as feminist international relations and feminist security studies. In its aim to “include knowledge from the margins” (Väyrynen et al., 2021, p. 3) and to highlight experiences of intersecting hierarchies including race, nationality, and ethnicity, FPR draws on indigenous knowledge, queer theories, post- and decolonial approaches, and black feminism(s) (e.g., MacKenzie & Wegener, 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021).

The contribution of postcolonial, decolonial, and intersectional ideas to the field of FRP is what inspires a “critical” approach (Väyrynen et al., 2021), as referred to in the introduction of this thesis. Critical FRP is, according to Väyrynen et al. 2021, “research, thinking, and action that uses, implicitly or explicitly, feminist insights to understand and act upon the world in ways that foster peace *with* justice” (p. 2, original emphasis). It is this critical approach, and especially ideas of decolonial feminism, that I draw on in the discussion chapter of this thesis. In this regard, it is useful to briefly highlight the distinction between postcolonial and decolonial feminism. Although the case of Palestine is a clear demonstration that we do not live in an actual post-colonial world, postcoloniality “asserts that the substance of colonialism persists in the continuing political, epistemic, socio-cultural, and economic domination of historically colonised peoples” (Motlafi, 2021, p. 179). Decolonial feminism aims to better understand such forms of colonality and advocates for a process of decolonisation, not just of peoples and land, but also of knowledge production and knowledge systems (Motlafi, 2021).

Coloniality exists within feminist practices and FPR as well, and it represents a point of tension between different strands of feminism (Mohanty, 2003; Kulawik, 2019; Väyrynen et al., 2021). Consequently, many disagreements arise within FPR and feminist theory. Feminist scholars, for instance, hold differing views on gender, how it should be conceptualised, and the causes of gender inequalities. However, FPR strives to address such tensions by engaging in ongoing discussions of difficult questions and disagreements within the field. In this practice, FPR encourages self-reflection and awareness of one’s positionality (Wibben, 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Parashar (2021), for example, encourages a process of ‘unsettling’ – unsettling the comfort of our privileges by challenging preexisting knowledge systems and structures:

As feminists we must get used to that position of discomfort, unsettling and annoyance. We are not in the business of pleasing the world out there, agreeing with established wisdom, borrowing the terms of reference from given knowledges. We have thrived only because we have created our unconventional frames of analysis and provided avantgarde visions (p. xvi).

One way in which FPR challenges preexisting knowledge is by changing the terms for what is considered knowledge and asking new questions about whose knowledge is relevant in the field of peace and conflict research (Parashar, 2021; Wibben, 2021). The core theoretical approach of FPR can be explained by the feminist expression that ‘the personal is political.’ This expression denies the separation of the personal and public spheres and insists that politics and power transcend and manifest within the personal sphere (Wibben, 2016; Björkdahl &

Selimovic, 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). This expression is an acknowledgement that personal experiences of violence are linked to wider structures within society (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). With this acknowledgement, the personal becomes a space that co-constructs politics and a space for theory formation, making personal experiences and stories valid sources of knowledge and research data (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021).

2.2.1 Lived and Embodied Experiences of Peace, War and Violence

In seeking to bring out marginalised and silenced voices, FPR acknowledges personal experiences and stories as representations of knowledge on war, violence, and peace. Instead of understanding what war, violence, and peace mean in the eyes of states, political elites, international organisations, or through military strategies, the starting point for FPR is at the bodies that experience these phenomena (Sylvester, 2013; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Although mainstream discourses on war and conflict tend to ignore it, these phenomena are intrinsically corporeal experiences, carried out by and against bodies (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). In this sense, “the politics of violence and conflict, and also peacebuilding and peace, are written on, experienced through and remembered in the thinking, feeling, moving and sensing body” (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024, p. 9). In other words, conflict and violence are felt in various ways by bodies, and bodies as active agents can play many roles in conflict. Bodies are politicised in conflict settings as they are prescribed identities, roles, and symbolic meanings (Parashar, 2013; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Bodies and relations between bodies are thus also a site of displaying power relations and enacting agency (Väyrynen et al., 2021). In sum, the body constitutes an important site of knowledge for FPR in understanding how war, violence, and peace are experienced by those who live in the middle of such settings.

In line with this, FPR has pushed a shift in focus towards the lived experiences of peace and conflict, in contrast to traditional disembodied ways of studying war (i.e., state-centric analyses) (Sylvester, 2013; Väyrynen et al., 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Due to the central role of the body and how it is situated, we can understand these embodied experiences as part of the ‘lived experience’ of war, violence, and peace. Thus, when I refer to ‘lived experiences’ going forward, it also refers to the embodied experiences. In this sense, the lived experience denotes how people experience and live in war, violence, and peace. Such experiences are individual; they are felt differently on different bodies. The notion of experiential knowledge and the significance of lived experiences has been developed by feminist thinkers such as Collins (2000), who in the book *Black Feminist Thought*, pays tribute to previous work based on such knowledge and understands it as central to black feminist epistemology. FPR builds

on these earlier conceptualisations, and Chio (2021) argues that experiential knowledge “is valuable because it is located in specific places and contexts, and in this sense, it can also reveal the politics of location” (p. 60). It is also valuable because it offers a human-centred perspective by highlighting the corporeal experience of a plurality of individuals whose experiences add nuance and new entry points to exploring what ‘peace’ means and how to work towards it (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021; Choi, 2021). The lived experiences and knowledge that we can derive from them are found in the everyday and the continuums of violence, which are two additional important concepts of FPR.

2.2.2 The Everyday and Continuums of Violence

First, to concretise and connect the concepts of lived experience and the everyday, we need to establish an understanding of experiences as representations of our lived reality. Experiences are situated in a specific location and a continuous reality. Thus, they are influenced by both spatial and temporal factors, with the former referring to the contextuality of the space in which the experience occurs. The temporal element implies that our lived experiences in the spatial context are continuous; we never stop experiencing as we live. In mundane, ordinary practices, in living our day-to-day lives, we encounter the implications of living in a specific spatial context with its politics and geographies. Likewise, it is in the everyday that we can capture the complexity and nuances of peace and violence as experienced by those living in the context being researched (Choi, 2021; Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021). In sum, FPR approaches the everyday as the central ‘place’ where our experiences are lived and shaped. It is where the embodied interaction with political, social, and cultural structures, along with the body’s symbolic materiality, fosters emotional and physical sensational responses that constitute our lived experience.

Importantly, FPR also sees bodies and everyday experiences as relational. As Väyrynen puts it, “[...] everyday is the intersubjective, corporeal and relational world where typifications through which we interpret the world and act in it are handed down to us” (2019, p. 18). This relates to the symbolic and cultural meaning-making of bodies, recognising peace as a corporeal and everyday practice. In this sense, peace is not something abstract but rather something that is being ‘done’ in a relational engagement with others, and rather than being a singular ‘thing’ or end goal, it is a process (Väyrynen, 2019; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). This line of thought forms the basis for the concept of everyday peace. Everyday peace refers to how individuals practice peace daily and navigate otherwise conflictual situations. This includes mundane everyday practices that help foster a culture of peace in contexts affected by

conflicts and antagonising divisions of groups or individuals (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Everyday peace also rests on a general understanding of peace and violence that does not simply see the two as fixed concepts that are each other's antonyms. Instead, peace(s) and violence(s) exist in pluralities as they are understood to materialise differently in different contexts, while they also co-exist on a spectrum and are related in various ways (Väyrynen, 2019; Väyrynen et al., 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024).

While figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Franz Fanon had already contributed to a nuancing of the understanding of peace to encompass more than just the absence of direct physical violence, it was Johan Galtung who formally initiated the theorisation of peace and violence within the field of peace and conflict studies (Singh & Poddar, 2021). In his writings, he first distinguished between negative and positive peace. He also formulated three categories of violence, namely, direct/physical violence, structural violence, and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969; 1990). Structural violence refers to indirect violence inflicted on individuals or groups at a structural or institutional level, resulting in discrimination, inequality, or oppression. Cultural violence describes how cultural factors and identifiers, such as religion or language, are used to legitimise both structural and direct violence. Such violence often becomes evident through social and public displays of, for example, sexism or racism (Galtung, 1969; 1990; Confortini, 2006; Singh & Poddar, 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). Using these categorisations, he defined negative peace as the absence of direct and physical violence. In contrast, positive peace is characterised by the absence of all types of violence, thus a state of a just society. Other scholars have further developed Galtung's distinctions and formulated additional categorizations of violence, such as 'slow violence' (latent and gradual violence, for example, caused by environmental degradation), 'epistemic violence' (silencing specific groups and the continuous reproduction of the dominating narrative), and 'epistemological violence' (research methods that cause harm or reproduce destructive knowledge structures) (Wibben et al., 2019; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024).

Scholars of FPR have also contributed to developing the notion of violence, arguing that early conceptualisations of peace and violence failed to account for gendered aspects, and that more attention needs to be paid to the coexistence of different types of violence before, during, and after instances of direct violence (Confortini, 2006; Väyrynen et al., 2021). Based on this critique and recognition, the notion of 'continuums of violence' was created (Väyrynen et al., 2021, p. 5). By using this term, FPR has developed an understanding of violence that acknowledges how different types of violence coexist and are deeply entangled, both temporally and spatially. Väyrynen et al. (2021) describe it as such:

The continuums of violence/peace manifest themselves temporally – in the buildup and legitimation of war through gendered institutions or in the daily work of establishing the foundations for peace – and spatially – in the connections between the private and public domains or between local realities and global forces. (p. 5)

FPR has used this understanding to further argue for the relationship and co-constructiveness of ‘domestic’ and ‘public’ violence, or small- and large-scale violence, and to explain how extended periods of structural and cultural violence can lead to direct violence. This, in turn, also illustrates the need to pay attention to everyday forms of violence, as such violences are entangled in other types of violence. In summary, by acknowledging that violences exist on a spatial and temporal continuum, FPR aims for a more holistic understanding of peace and violence that considers the intertwining of the two concepts. I will now turn to literature that has conceptualised the everyday and highlighted types of everyday violences in the oPt.

2.3 The Everyday and Everyday Encounters with Violence in the oPt

As theorised by FPR, the everyday is shaped by the spatial and temporal context in which it occurs. While the studies I refer to in this section do not necessarily rely on the same conceptualisation of the everyday or consciously utilise approaches of FPR, they are useful in terms of discovering the everyday experiences of peace and violence in Palestine. The spatio-temporal and socio-political context of these everyday experiences is one I refer to as a militarised, settler-colonial context. While I acknowledge that others may describe it differently or validly experience it as something else, this is the theoretically grounded description of the context that I apply throughout the thesis. However, a definition and some critical reflections on the concept of settler-colonialism, and what constitutes a ‘militarised’ version in this case, are necessary.

2.3.1 Militarised Settler-colonialism

Settler-colonialism has been conceptualised by scholars who emphasise the phenomenon's different aspects (Veracini, 2024). As scholars acknowledge that settler-colonialism can manifest in multiple forms, as demonstrated by, for example, Elkins & Pedersen (2005), Wolfe (2006), and Veracini (2024), it is difficult, and potentially problematic, to form one narrow, rigid definition of settler-colonialism. Instead, Wolfe (2006), to whom many scholars in the field turn in describing the phenomenon, characterises it “as a complex social formation and as a continuity through time” (p. 401). He describes settler-colonialism as a ‘logic of extermination’ (pp. 387-8) and distinguishes the characteristics of settler colonialism from those of colonialism. Firstly, Wolfe emphasises that settler colonialism “is a structure, not an

event” (p. 388). Thus, it is a process that unfolds over time, during which institutions and structures are shaped and formed to favour the settlers. He also notes that settler colonialism aims to ‘eliminate’ and replace native populations on their land, as land is central to a settler-colonial project (Wolfe, 2006).

All settler-colonial sites have unique features and characteristics, and so does the Israel-Palestine case. While it has been acknowledged by historians, and is clear from historical documents, that the Zionist project was a settler-colonial project from its outset (Wolfe, 2006; Hassan, 2011; Wolfe, 2016; Khalidi, 2020; Tartir, et al., 2024), Wolfe (2016) importantly points out that such initial intent is irrelevant to the legitimization of characterising Israel as a settler-colonial context. Rather, it is the outcome of the expulsion of Palestinians from their land and the settlers’ means of manifesting this ‘logic of extermination’ that testifies to its settler-colonial nature. Furthermore, Wolfe, along with other scholars (for example, Hassan, 2011; Hanafi, 2013; Khalidi, 2020), debunks the legitimation of Israel’s claim to the land based on the myth that the land was uninhabited (2016).

However, other scholars pay more attention to the ‘exceptionalism’ of this specific case by comparatively pointing out how it differs from classic colonial projects, for example, by its ideological roots in Zionism and the lack of a typical ‘metropole’ centre, relying instead on support from foreign states (Lloyd, 2012; Dana, 2024). Furthermore, there is a distinction between colonial forms of control and settler-colonialism, which can be hard to identify in this setting, as various administrative systems exist depending on whether one is in Gaza, East Jerusalem, or the West Bank (WB). Veracini (2013) also draws attention to the fact that the purpose of settler-colonialism is to cease being a settler-colonial project. In this sense, it is only fully accomplished once the settlers are considered native and their permanent presence is normalised, which has happened in, for example, the United States and Australia. Thus, reaffirming that settler-colonialism is a process, albeit with an end goal, Veracini states that in Israel, this endpoint has been reached, whereas in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), it has not. Here, the process is still ongoing (Veracini, 2013).

The above descriptions and uses of the term testify to its complexity. Furthermore, it is laden with political symbolism and often denied by many when applied epistemically to actual contexts. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to address these aspects. Rather, I draw on previous literature and conceptualisations as they help describe the spatial and temporal context of everyday life in Palestine. Using the term settler-colonialism, and especially leaning on Wolfe’s description and characterisations, provides a framework for understanding both the ongoing processes (temporal) and the systems and institutions of

repression (ranging from local to global), land dispossession, and mobility restrictions (spatial). This is why I primarily use the term ‘settler-colonialism’ as opposed to, for example, ‘military occupation.’ However, a major part of the ongoing settler-colonial project in the WB is Israel’s military occupation, which is a means of domination that is deeply entangled with settler-colonialism. Hence, I couple the term ‘settler-colonialism’ with ‘militarised’ because the military presence is one of the main characteristics of Israel’s settler-colonial practices in the WB, as Israel applies martial law to achieve its settler-colonial goals (Lloyd & Wolfe, 2016; Ekarat, 2019; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019). By using the term ‘militarised, settler-colonialism,’ I attempt to capture as many aspects and characteristics as possible of the context in which the interviewees live their everyday lives. In sum, this framework helps to understand the ‘everyday’ setting while this thesis aims to highlight how it is experienced, encountered, and navigated by those living it.

2.3.2 The Everyday in a Militarised, Settler-Colonial Context

In previous research, a range of approaches and perspectives have been applied to capture different aspects of everyday life in the oPt. However, it seems to have been studied most extensively through the lens of resistance. One such example is the book *Resisting Domination in Palestine. Mechanisms and Techniques of Control, Coloniality and Settler Colonialism* (Tartir et al., 2024), in which the contributors explore four different areas of domination (political, economic, environmental, and epistemic) and how they are resisted. In the introduction, they highlight how relationships of domination and resistance are co-constructive. Throughout the book, various methods and interdisciplinary approaches are applied to study the dynamics of domination and resistance in Palestine. Thus, this new book covers diverse “sites” and means of resistance, such as digital platforms and popular education (Tartir et al., 2024), whereas previous research has looked more narrowly at resistance by focusing on, for example, specific cases or types of resistance, one of them being ‘everyday resistance,’ which in the case of Palestine is strongly related to the term ‘sumūd’ (in Arabic: صمود)(see, e.g., Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019; Busse, 2022; Kayali, 2024).

Perhaps the meaning of ‘sumūd’ is best captured by someone who practices it every day, thus I cite here the words of Abdelfattah Abusrour, founder of Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society in Aida Refugee Camp outside of Bethlehem:

Sumūd is continuing to live in Palestine, laughing, enjoying life, falling in love, getting married, having children. *Sumūd* is also continuing your studies outside, to get a diploma, to come back here.... That I am here is *sumūd*. To reclaim that you

are a human being and defending your humanity is *sumud*. (As cited in Dunsky, 2021, p. 6, original emphasis)

In the literature, ‘sumūd,’ which can be translated to either ‘steadfastness’ or ‘persistence,’ is used to describe the nature of Palestinians’ everyday resistance. For instance, Johansson & Vinthagen (2019) use the term to uncover how Palestinians engage in a variety of mundane acts and adopt specific behaviours and attitudes in their day-to-day life to resist Israeli control (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019). For example, they highlight how, when facing ‘the logic of elimination,’ simply trying to live a “livable life” consisting “of simple things such as attending school, planting a new olive tree or making a wedding celebration” (p. 158) constitutes everyday resistance and sumūd. In a similar vein, Seidel & Stagni (2024) draw on sumūd in their conceptualisation of resistance by Palestinians who have experienced settler violence in the South Hebron Hills of the WB. However, Busse (2022) argues that solely using the framework of everyday resistance is insufficient to capture the full nature of normalcy in a conflict setting and introduces the concept of sumūd as both a quotidian and spatial practice. He highlights that sumūd primarily is about carrying on with life and obtaining some level of normalcy, despite the many challenges faced by Palestinians. Resting on the notion that the everyday is always spatially situated, Palestinians practice sumūd by simply remaining present in their homes and on their land, thereby demonstrating the spatiality and everydayness of sumūd (Busse, 2022).

Thus, sumūd is often used in the context of resistance and to describe Palestinian resilience. Palestinian resilience, however, should not be conflated with western, neoliberal conceptualizations of resilience which emphasises individual resilience capacities and is often used in relation to disaster responses and management or ‘resilience’ projects funded by international organizations. As a term often conceptualised by the Global North and applied to the Global South, scholars argue for a more situated approach to resilience (see e.g. Meriläinen et al., 2022; Kayali, 2024). When using the term resilience in this thesis, it refers to particular Palestinian ways of resilience – such resilience is transformative (rather than simply recovery-oriented) and is characterised by resistance and sumūd. Furthermore, it relies on solidarity and is a response to Palestinians’ collective exposure to decades of settler-colonialism and must be understood in this context (Giacaman, 2020; Kayali, 2024).

Terms such as sumūd, resilience, and resistance embrace many overlapping aspects of what it means to live in this context and are thus often used to understand everyday life in Palestine. Another relevant and useful way to explore aspects of everyday life in Palestine is through individual narratives and lived experiences. In the book *Stories from Palestine:*

Narratives of Resilience (Dunsky, 2021), the author aims to fill the gap in scholarly research on the topic, which rarely delves into lived experiences but remains focused on observable aspects. The narratives presented in the book challenge typical representations of Palestinians in Western media as either victims or perpetrators of violence by highlighting their creativity, agency, and individuality. For example, the book shares a story about farmers who continue to cultivate their land and find innovative ways to make the most of their limited land and water access. Additionally, it invites the reader into a theatre class at Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society and delves into the life story and artistic visions of its founder, Abusrour (Dunsky, 2021). Similarly, Bleibleh and Awad (2024) explore the everyday spatial experience of women street vendors in Ramallah, examining their resourcefulness and adaptability in a challenging environment based on, among other things, interviews and ethnographic research.

What the above examples have in common is that they all show how everyday life in this spatio-temporal context is shaped by *sumūd*, resilience, and resistance. These terms are prevalent throughout the literature describing the everyday in the oPt. However, in the book *Encountering Palestine: Un/making Spaces of Colonial Violence*, Griffiths and Joronen (2023) introduce another approach to engaging with the everyday in Palestine, namely through ‘encounters’ with colonial violence. In the introduction, the authors point out how decades of colonisation and militarised occupation have inevitably affected every aspect of everyday life in the oPt, touched by some form of colonial power and violence. They conceptualise the ‘encounter’ as a flexible term and understand it to embrace many types of encounters between two relational ‘others,’ for example, the coloniser and the colonised, emphasising that dominance and power are simultaneously made and unmade in encounters (Griffiths & Joronen, 2023). In the following chapters, the contributors explore various sites of encounters, such as Israel’s biopolitical control of bodies, the workings of a settler-based NGO, and a surrealist movie depicting an alternative vision for the future of Palestine. Although recognising that such encounters can occur in quotidian places and practices, the book does not specifically use the everyday as a site for knowing and analysing these encounters. However, due to the versatility of the concept, it is useful in capturing how colonial violence infiltrates and is mitigated in various aspects of everyday life in Palestine.

Thus, there are many ways to approach the everyday in Palestine. Despite the different approaches, what previous research has in common is that it illustrates how various types of violence influence everyday life, and it is part of Palestinians’ existence to navigate and mitigate such violence. Understanding the violence that Palestinians face as part of a continuum of violence clarifies that it expands widely both temporally and spatially. Settler colonialism,

as a process of elimination, can also be understood as a temporal process of violence where different types are applied in various spatial sites. For instance, a farmer may experience direct violence from settlers, directed towards themselves or their crops, structural violence when they want to build a new structure or stop their land from being expropriated (see, e.g., Fields, 2012; Dunsky, 2021; Grosalik et al., 2021; Ghantous, 2023; Seidel & Stagni, 2024), and cultural violence when their identity as Palestinians is being at once denied, dehumanised, and seen as a threat (Brockhill & Cordell, 2019). While the geographical and environmental changes imposed by Israel's settler-colonial project also amount to slow and environmental violence (Amira, 2021), scholars have highlighted the epistemic violence of silencing Palestinian voices in both academic discourse and negotiations with Israel for peace, and how this is entangled with international structures and dominant narratives of the West (e.g., Al-Hardan, 2014; Sen, 2024; Wildeman, 2024). Furthermore, Israel's permit regime and other means of restricting Palestinians' mobility through walls and checkpoints, combined with unpredictable military incursions and settler encounters that constantly impose a state of insecurity, capture some of the forms of colonial violence that Palestinians encounter in their everyday lives (Ghantous, 2023).

This section does not provide an extensive overview of previous research on the everyday in Palestine or the continuums of violence experienced by Palestinians. Rather, the examples and literature included intend to present some general tendencies and alternative approaches to studying the everyday, as well as everyday encounters with and reactions to various forms of violence. Additionally, this section seeks to briefly outline how the continuum of violence faced by Palestinians in their everyday lives ranges from direct to indirect, slow to imminent, and local to global. In conclusion, previous research into the everyday in Palestine illustrates how utilising the everyday as a site of knowledge might help unfold how violence occurs on a continuum and how it is encountered with resistance, *sumūd*, creativity, and agency.

3. Historical and Contextual Background

Providing a contextual and historical background on the current situation in Israel-Palestine is a contestable endeavour in itself. I am highly aware and acknowledge that choosing which words to use and which events to highlight can be viewed as deliberate political decisions. While this aspect exists in all historical accounts, this context is particularly charged with meaning of political and religious significance. This makes it impossible to navigate on a neutral common ground upon writing this, as there is no agreed-upon account of the history. Nonetheless, to understand the current context that forms the basis of this research, we must understand how we arrived here. Therefore, a historical background needs to be presented. Before doing so, I will briefly account for some of the decisions and reflections made upon writing this chapter.

I begin my historical background section by accounting for the origins of the Zionist movement and the first wave of Jewish migration to Palestine, and then trace the historical developments up to the present day. Lastly, I will present the current situation and, more specifically, explain the local context of Bethlehem and the RTM community. I start at this point in history because I understand this to be the beginning of the demographic and territorial changes that, eventually, created the current situation on the ground. A deliberate choice has been made not to include territorial claims and accounts based on religious texts, as these do not constitute valid legal claims. However, it is important to recognise that in the local context and understanding of this dispute, the religious factors are essential. The religious narratives are not about provability; rather, they convey meanings, symbolism, and emotions that, in essence, contribute to the politicisation of the context.

Thus, I recognise the importance of this aspect but have chosen to exclude it here because the focus of this research is on exercise in a militarised, settler-colonial context. The events included in the historical background provide a temporal context essential for understanding the current socio-political and spatial environment, defined by demographic and territorial developments. They also aim to illustrate how decisions by external powers and actors, driven by a logic of superiority and coloniality, ignited friction and division. Events and nuances have been excluded, and I acknowledge that what follows is not a complete account of history, as such a task is beyond the scope of this study, if even possible. On this note, as the status is rapidly changing at the time of writing, a decision was made to conclude the account of the current situation by the time of the last interview (February 20, 2025).

3.1 Historical Background

A combination of factors, including antisemitism in Europe and nationalist sentiments, initially compelled Jewish settlers to migrate to Palestine in the last decades of the 19th century. According to Theodor Herzl, one of the fathers of Zionism, a national state for Jews in Palestine was the only solution to the problems experienced by Jews throughout Europe (Cohn-Sherbok, 2012). Throughout history, Jews have encountered countless waves of antisemitism, antisemitic violence, and persecution. The various settings in which the scattered Jewish communities lived differed based on general conditions and the varying antisemitic sentiments in different locations (Lindemann & Levy, 2010). At this point in time, most Jews in Western Europe and North America lived relatively safe lives. In most places within this geographical area, they had the same rights as everyone else, at least in theory. However, many experienced discriminatory incidents, and antisemitism was on the rise. According to Ari Shavit, the assimilation process and the resulting fear of the dissolution of cohesive Jewish communities were another concern for early Zionist thinkers, as it threatened the preservation of traditions and religious practices in these countries. In Eastern Europe, the concerns were far more grave. Antisemitism presented a life threat to Jews, who faced numerous difficulties. They were persecuted, and instances of antisemitic pogroms appeared across the region. Meanwhile, in Islamic societies, Jews were perceived as inferior communities. These developments and factors were seen as a threat to Judaism as a whole by Zionist thinkers, who viewed the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine as the only solution (Shavit, 2017).

However, Palestine was already inhabited and under Ottoman rule. Among the leading Zionists, different intents with the movement were expressed. Some, like Hertz, were more indirect in their public rhetoric regarding the existing Arab population. In contrast, others openly declared the Zionist movement's intent to establish a settler-colonial state in Palestine and 'get rid' of the Arab population. Various methods for achieving this were shared, which, during this heyday of colonialism in the Western world, were a relatively normal part of the colonising process, as Western administrations were doing this to native populations in many other areas. Hence, at this stage, the Zionist movement was quite openly a colonial movement (Khalidi, 2020).

It is important to remember that the existing population in Palestine also consisted of Arab Jews, although they comprised only a small percentage of the native population¹. Until

¹ 3,2% in 1880, according to Justin McCarthy's (1990) work, based on archives from the Ottoman Administration, although there are no exact numbers from the pre-mandate period.

the idea of Jewish and Arab nationalism became prominent in the region, Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted relatively peacefully (Khalidi, 2020; see also Klein, 2014). The immigration process of non-Arab Jews to Palestine began in 1882, followed by a second wave that lasted from 1904 to 1914 (Jacobsen, 2011). By the end of World War I, Jews made up 6% of the population, a number that grew rapidly and reached 18% in 1926 (Khalidi, 2020).

As support for a Jewish national state in Palestine grew in Britain, World War I had not even been declared over before they officially stated their support in the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917. According to the Sykes-Picot Agreement made between the British and French during the war, which divided the territory of the Ottoman Empire between the two, the land constituting Palestine was to be divided between them after the war. The Zionist Organisations' requests for their national homeland made prior to the Balfour Declaration encompassed far more land than the British and French eventually agreed to establish as the British Mandate of Palestine, leaving out northern Galilee. While the Zionist Organisation was dissatisfied with the outcome, it was a necessary concession in the negotiations between the British and the French, which also demanded that the British cease their support for Arab independence in Syria, breaking off their commitment to the Arab representative Emir Feisal (Cohn-Sherbok, 2012). Due to the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the British and French colonial presence in the region, a period of unrest and subsequent independence movements followed. Eventually, they had to give up colonial control of Turkey, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, allowing some level of independence (Khalidi, 2020). In Palestine, however, the talk about independence was quite different.

With the Balfour Declaration, the British officially declared their commitment to establishing a homeland for Jews in Palestine, giving little thought to the native population. In the Balfour Declaration, they are described as "existing non-Jewish communities" who were promised civil and religious rights (Balfour Declaration, 1917) – political and national rights of such 'communities', which at the time constituted 94% of the population, were not recognised. This contradicted the League of Nations Article 22, which recognised the right to independence of the people from the former Ottoman Empire, a principle that both the League of Nations and Great Britain repeatedly refused to apply to the Palestinians (Khalidi, 2017). As many have highlighted (e.g., Stork, 1972; Lindemann & Levy, 2010; Khalidi, 2017), the British did not issue the Balfour Declaration as a benevolent gesture towards Jews. It has been documented how Lord Balfour himself expressed antisemitic sentiments and how the Zionist vision was supported by, for example, the US and Russia as a way of solving the issues and problems that the Jews were understood to cause in such societies. Thus, part of the broader

support for a Jewish state was motivated by antisemitism, as it would mean "shipping off unwanted aliens to Palestine ("to make positive contributions to civilisation")" (Stork, 1972, p. 13).

During the years following the establishment of the British mandate, the British administration granted legal and administrative rights, as well as official status, to Zionist institutions, while denying the same to the Arab population. A Palestinian revolt against the British Mandate took place during the years 1936-39. Meanwhile, Hitler and his Nazi ideology were on the rise in Germany, making Europe an increasingly unsafe place for Jews. During the Second World War, more than a third of the world's Jewish population was killed, and the Holocaust looms to this day as one of the most horrendous atrocities ever committed, marking a significant blemish on humanity. Naturally, this created an urgent need to create safety for Jews globally, as it posed a threat to the existence of the Jewish community in general. After the Second World War, the question of how the Zionist project would unfold in Palestine became even more prominent and charged with political and emotional significance (Cohn-Sherbok, 2012).

The question was handed over to the newly established United Nations (UN), whose special committee recommended that Palestine should be divided into two states, with so-called 'international zones' covering the disputed holy sites (Cohn-Sherbok, 2012, p. 121). Although the Jewish population at that time amounted to 30-40% of the total population, this plan allocated 56% of the territory to the future state of Israel (Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), n.d.). As the recommendation reached two-thirds of the votes in favour of implementation in the General Assembly, although opposed by Arab and Muslim states, the British Mandate was set to end on May 15, 1948. On the same day, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, declared the creation of the independent nation of Israel (Cohn-Sherbok, 2012). The *Nakba* ('catastrophe') refers to the events following the UN partition plan and the declaration of the state of Israel, which resulted in about half of the Palestinian population becoming refugees as they were forcibly displaced or had to flee from their land. At the same time, hundreds of Palestinian villages were demolished and practically deleted from the map (Khalidi, 2017). The Israelis refer to these events as the war of independence, while internationally, it is often referred to as the Arab-Israeli war, as it was fought not only internally but also between Israel and its Arab neighbours- Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The 1949 armistice line, established after the Arab-Israeli war, further reduced Palestinian territory, which then consisted only of the Gaza Strip, occupied by Egypt, and the West Bank, occupied by Jordan (Gelvin, 2021). The 1949 armistice line allocated 78% of the territory to the State of

Israel, while the remaining 22% comprised the territory occupied by Egypt and Jordan (UCDP, n.d.).

The next time the borders were redrawn was in 1967, after Egypt moved troops to the Sinai Peninsula upon receiving false reports from the Soviet Union that Israel was about to attack Syria (Gelvin, 2021). This move gave Israel the opportunity to launch a long-planned attack that took out the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian air forces in one strike (Khalidi, 2020). After just six days of fighting, Israel had taken control of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Syria's Golan Heights, a small piece of Jordanian land, as well as Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the WB. In UN resolution 242 (UN Security Council (UNSC), 1967), which was accepted by Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, the latter two agreed to settle a peace agreement and officially recognise Israel in return for their (Egypt's) land (Gelvin, 2021). The vague definition of which occupied territories Israel needed to withdraw from, according to Resolution 242, gave Israel a loophole to hold on to the rest of its occupied territories and permanently occupy them. From here on, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza have comprised what is known as the occupied Palestinian territories. Furthermore, Resolution 242 validated the 1949 armistice borders instead of those suggested in the 1947 UN partition plan. These borders are referred to today as the Green Line or 1976 borders, acknowledging Israel's acquisition of Palestinian land in 1948, thus leaving only the areas referred to as the oPt as Palestinian territory. Resolution 242 and a shift in US policy since 1967, showing more consistent support for Israel, had serious consequences for the Palestinians and future peace (Khalidi, 2020).

Another significant outcome of the 1967 war and Resolution 242 was that it triggered a stronger and more organised Palestinian political movement. While the Palestinian people and a future Palestinian state were more or less ignored in Resolution 242, including their right to return, which had previously been reaffirmed by Resolution 194, the ensuing political organisation proved this ignorance to be a mistake. It gave a voice to the Palestinians that the international community had not provided. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its resistance groups, including Fatah, led by Yasser Arafat, became prominent and began working more actively for liberation and resistance (Khalidi, 2020; Gelvin, 2021).

The first Palestinian Intifada, or 'uprising', against Israeli occupation took place during 1987-93. The Intifada involved not only the politically active community in Palestine but also a broader section of Palestinian society who stood up against the occupation either overtly or covertly. Sparked by the deaths of four Palestinians in a Gaza refugee camp after being hit by one of the occupation forces' military trucks, the revolts began to spread across all the occupied territories. Organised acts of both active and passive resistance against the occupation, such as

boycotts, protests, throwing stones, and efforts to manage social and economic burdens, kept the Intifada alive. The Intifada was costly in many ways, both in terms of lives and living standards for the Palestinians. Some argue that the election of Yitzhak Rabin as Israel's Prime Minister in 1992 indicated that Israelis had also started to consider the costs of the occupation, as Rabin was committed to finding a solution to the conflict (Gelvin, 2021).

By 1993, the PLO and Arafat, now the leader of the organisation, had been recognised as the Palestinians' political representatives. He participated alongside Rabin in the Oslo Peace talks, the first direct peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. This resulted in the signing of the Oslo Accords. These talks received much praise internationally and were interpreted as a breakthrough in the process toward lasting peace (Gelvin, 2021). With this, Israel, for the first time, acknowledged the existence of a Palestinian people; the PLO accepted Resolution 242 and acknowledged Israel's right to exist, although Israel did not have to acknowledge a similar right for the Palestinian people (Khalidi, 2020). As part of these agreements, the Palestinian Authority (PA), with Arafat as its president, was established as the administrative unit in the oPt. The WB was divided into three categories – Areas A, B, and C – with varying degrees of Palestinian autonomy and Israeli control. The ramifications and current manifestation of these categorisations of Palestinian territory will be elaborated on later, as they are detrimental to understanding the current spatial context of the WB today. The eventual official Palestinian state would be contingent upon settling other issues as a process to be concluded in 1999 (Gelvin, 2021).

However, the principles agreed upon in the Oslo Accords left many issues contingent on practical processes and future negotiations. Consequently, many of the final aims never materialised. An agreement about the final status of Palestine and other core issues, such as the right to return and dismantling Israel's illegal settlements, was never reached. Instead, the number of Israeli settlements in the WB doubled between 1993 and 2000. Both sides faced internal opposition to the Oslo Accords. In Israel, this primarily came from nationalist parties like Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party and in Palestine from the Islamic militant group Hamas (Gelvin, 2021). Hamas was formed during the first Intifada as an Islamic resistance group but eventually also became active as a political party after the Oslo Accords (UCDP, n.d.).

Due to widespread dissatisfaction and frustration with the outcome of the Oslo Accords, the second Intifada broke out in 2000. Compared to the first Intifada, the second Intifada was characterised less by hope and non-violent resistance and increasingly by anger, frustration, and greater use of violent means of resistance (Norman, 2010). When the Second Intifada ended with a ceasefire in 2005, Israel had begun erecting a separation wall between the oPt and Israel.

Additionally, Arafat had died, and the PLO was now led by Mahmoud Abbas (UCDP, n.d.). Meanwhile, Hamas's popularity in Gaza had increased. In 2007, they gained administrative control in Gaza after winning elections. The WB remained governed by Fatah and the officially recognised PA, causing power struggles between the two parties (Norman, 2010).

The last two decades of the conflict have been violent, especially in Gaza, which has experienced wars in 2008-9, 2012, 2014, and 2021, along with several other instances of attacks and invasions (UCDP, n.d.; Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2024). Hamas and other extremist groups have meanwhile carried out horrific terror attacks, the deadliest occurring on October 7, 2023, which killed 1200 Israeli civilians and involved the taking of around 200 hostages (Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2024). This sparked the ongoing war, which is fought between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. However, the war extends temporally beyond October 7, 2023, and spatially well beyond Gaza. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has deemed Israel's disproportionate measures in Gaza to plausibly amount to genocide (UN, January 31, 2024), while the International Criminal Court (ICC) has accused both parties, Hamas and Israel, of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes (ICC, May 20, 2024).

The situation is constantly evolving, and at the time of writing, a ceasefire deal has been agreed upon as of January 19, 2025. The first of three phases is going on now, in which Hamas is to release 33 of the 94 hostages still in Gaza in exchange for 2.000 Palestinian prisoners and Israeli withdrawal from most of Gaza (Crisis Group, January 21, 2025). While a ceasefire is crucial for the people in Gaza who are in dire need of humanitarian aid and food assistance, as Israel, according to a UN report, has used "starvation as a weapon of war" (UN General Assembly, 2024, p. 2), history shows us that a ceasefire does not necessarily bring an end to war, violence, and suffering². Meanwhile, in the WB, the violence against Palestinians by settlers and the Israeli military has increased (Agha et al., 2024; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, August 28, 2024). Furthermore, new roadblocks, gates, and checkpoints have closed off cities and imposed further limitations on Palestinians' movement (UN Palestine, January 22, 2025).

3.2 Current Situation in the West Bank

The current situation in the West Bank is evolving alongside the broader context, as recent developments after the ceasefire demonstrate. Since the war in Gaza, Israel has implemented

² The ceasefire was broken by Israel on March 18, 2025. Furthermore, Israel has blocked all humanitarian aid from entering Gaza since March 1, 2025. As of April 18, 2025, the death toll in Gaza has well surpassed 50,000 (International Crisis Group, April 18, 2025).

additional measures and barriers that restrict Palestinians' mobility, adding to the already existing ones (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2024, September 25). The separation and categorisation of land have become key spatial features of the WB since it was divided into areas A, B, and C in the Oslo Accords. What follows is a simple overview of what this entails on paper:

Area A: Security and civilian administration is under full control of the PA (18% of the territory).

Area B: Under shared PA and Israeli control. Israel holds civil administration rights over Jewish settlements, while the PA has civil administrative rights over the Arab population. Israel holds full security control of the area (22% of the territory).

Area C: Civil and security administration under Israeli control (60% of the territory).

In practice, these categorisations mean that PA only has partial control over 40% of the territory within the so-called Green Line. Areas A and B generally encompass the Palestinian urban centres, including Bethlehem, and contain about 87% of the Palestinian population. Most refugee camps are also located within Area B. Area C includes all the surrounding territory that houses Israel's settlements and military posts, as well as the remaining Palestinian population (Gelvin, 2021; Khalidi, 2020). On the ground, this means that the Palestinian-controlled territory consists of 165 disconnected areas, which are separated by Israeli-controlled areas, isolating them from one another (See Map 1 in Appendix I). This complicates movement between the areas, as there may be checkpoints or other physical barriers, while Israel often prevents the construction of connective infrastructure between them. For Palestinians living in Area C, obtaining permits for new construction is practically impossible, while there is barely any land left to build on in Areas A and B (B'Tselem, 2019). Furthermore, Israel controls the outer borders of the oPt, also between the WB and East Jerusalem, which it has officially annexed. Thus, Palestinians need permits to travel between the oPt and may also be restricted movement within the WB. According to the OCHA, there were 793 'movement obstacles' in the WB and East Jerusalem as of September 2024. These obstacles consist of: "89 checkpoints staffed 24/7; 149 partial checkpoints that are not always staffed (46 of which have gates); 158 earthmounds; 196 road gates (122 of which are usually closed); 104 road blocks; and 97 linear closures, each of which blocks one or more roads, such as road barriers, earthwalls and trenches" (OCHA, 2024, September 25).

Another prominent feature of Israel's settler-colonial presence in the WB is the separation wall, which adds to the division of Palestinian territories. In 2002, Israel began constructing a 700-kilometre-long wall, cutting off the WB from Israel. At most points, the

wall is built deep into the Palestinian territories. While it further reduces the Palestinian land, it also separates neighbourhoods and restricts Palestinians' access to their land. In summary, when adding the restrictions imposed by the wall to the roadblocks, closures, and security checkpoints – both permanent and spontaneous– a clearer picture forms of the extent to which Palestinians in the WB are restricted in movement. The poor infrastructure exacerbates the difficulties of travelling from one place to another, as Palestinians drive on badly maintained, poorly connected, and wrinkled roads. In contrast, newer, well-connected roads are reserved for Israeli number plates only (Morrison, 2024).

It is not only the Palestinians' ability to move between places in the WB that is under Israeli control; Israel also controls the water resources, allowing only 20% of the shared resources to the Palestinians in the WB, who face a constant water shortage (B'Tselem, 2021). The WHO has expressed serious concerns about the health situation in the WB, which has worsened since 2023, as increased restrictions on movement have made it difficult for Palestinians to reach health facilities and hindered ambulances and aid workers from reaching patients. The rising violence has also led to more attacks on Palestinian health facilities, affecting their ability to treat the growing number of patients. Due to the permit system, Israel also controls Palestinians' access to vital health care outside of the WB. Since October 7, 2023, the number of accepted medical treatment permits in Israel has decreased (WHO, June 14, 2024).

In essence, the WB consists of numerous Palestinian 'bantustans' separated by settlements, checkpoints, and concrete walls. It restricts their movement and access to essential services such as water, health care, education, and, for some, their livelihoods (Morrison, 2024). Israel's occupation of the WB, the settlements, and its construction of the separation wall have been declared illegal by the ICJ (UN, July 9, 2004; UN, July 22, 2024). Today, over 700,000 Israeli settlers live in the WB, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights (Syrian territory occupied by Israel), a number that is still increasing as Israel continues to confiscate more land and evict Palestinians from their homes (Morrison, 2024).

3.3 Bethlehem and the Right to Movement community

As mentioned previously, since October 7, 2023, conditions for Palestinians living in the WB have worsened, and more measures restricting their movement have been imposed (OCHA, September 25, 2024; OCHA, January 23, 2025). It is within this context of increased tension that this research is situated, specifically in the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is located about 10 km south of Jerusalem. However, getting from one city to the other easily

takes 45 minutes due to the checkpoint and a lengthy redirection of the road because of the separation wall. As the birthplace of Jesus, housing the Church of the Nativity and Rachel's Tomb, it holds great religious significance. The Municipality of Bethlehem has a population of approximately 32.000 people (Bethlehem Municipality, 2014), while the total population of Bethlehem Governorate is about 210.000 (OCHA, February 4, 2015), of which 10% are Christians while the rest are Muslims, according to a Reuters source (Abu Ganeyeh, December 2, 2024).

85% of the territory belonging to the Bethlehem governorate is categorised as Area C (OCHA, February 4, 2015), meaning that the actual space in which the population has free movement is very limited and crowded. Bethlehem is located so close to the separation wall that parts of the city are directly enclosed by it. This makes the physical presence of Israel's occupation very present. A small strip of land alongside the wall is classified as Area C. This strip contains a road connecting Bethlehem to Jerusalem, separated by an Israeli checkpoint. Bethlehem's proximity to this checkpoint and Israeli territory gives the Israeli military direct access to the city and to Aida Refugee Camp, which is located on the outskirts of the city, bordering the western adjacent town of Beit Jala (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 2023). To the east of Bethlehem City lies the town of Beit Sahour, and to the south is the town of Al Khadr. These towns constitute a densely built urban area, enclosed by walls, checkpoints, and settlements (See also Maps 2 & 3 in Appendix I).

In this context, the Right to Movement (RTM) community in Bethlehem carries out its activities. In what follows, the information about RTM, both as an umbrella community and regarding the specifics of the Bethlehem community, mainly comes from what was shared during the interviews. The interview with George, one of the founders, has helped gather background information about the community. Any information that does not come from the interviews is cited as usual.

The Right to Movement initiative was created in 2012 to establish a yearly marathon in Bethlehem, along with other smaller running and solidarity events throughout the oPt, and to promote exercise-based communities within Palestinian society. RTM was founded by two Danish women and a group of local Palestinians, including George, who established an organisation in Denmark to oversee the official arrangements for the Marathon. The first Palestine Marathon took place successfully in 2013 and grew increasingly popular and profitable over the next four years. Following this success, the PA forced the RTM to transfer the organising responsibilities to the Municipality. George shares how this transition included much distress and political smear campaigns against the RTM organisers who wished to

continue organising the Marathon. Although the Danish organisation was dismantled, they managed to maintain the running groups and RTM as a community.

Today, the Right to Movement community exists in Bethlehem and other cities in the oPt and Israel. At the time of writing, there are active exercise communities representing RTM in Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jerusalem, and, to varying degrees, Haifa. The individual groups organise themselves differently based on needs and logistics. Communities have also existed in Jaffa, Nazareth, Jericho, Hebron, and, for a short period, in Gaza as well. George points out to me that each of these groups faced different challenges based on the social and political dynamics in their specific contexts. In Gaza, for example, the main challenge in maintaining the group was the immobility and lack of connection between the local and umbrella community in the WB caused by Israel's restrictions on their movement, while in Hebron, more conservative views on mixed-gender sports made it challenging to establish a functioning and active group. Thus, each of the past and current groups navigates difficult contexts and faces different challenges, which in themselves are interesting to study as a way of gaining an understanding of the broader challenges faced by Palestinians in different localities in the oPt and Israel. This study, however, begins with Bethlehem.

Before going into detail with the RTM Bethlehem community, we can conclude that RTM is a collective of communities connected under the RTM umbrella that cooperate in spreading their message – that is, as their name clearly states, that Palestinians have a right to movement. For example, they may facilitate members' participation in marathons worldwide to represent the RTM community abroad or engage in fundraising and solidarity activities. While they run in clothing featuring their established logo (See Appendix IV) and maintain a presence on social media, RTM is not a registered organisation. It is a non-profit, volunteer-based social movement, composed of people who enjoy exercising as part of a group and participating in other social activities together.

In Bethlehem, the RTM community meets every Tuesday in an indoor basketball court for a combination of cardio and strength exercises. Every Friday, they gather outside for a run or walk. They typically communicate through a WhatsApp group chat where organisers send information, reminders, and pictures from the training sessions. The location of the Friday gatherings varies, depending on the season and security situation. Usually, the group meets at the entrance of a monastery in Cremisan Valley, a beautiful natural area just outside Beit Jala. On the opposite side of Cremisan Valley is another beautiful nature area called Al-Makhrour, another favoured running spot used by the group at times. According to Abdel, one of the research participants, "Cremisan and Al-Makhrour have the best sunset in the world." These

two nature spots are the only ones in the area that are spacious enough and suitable for running. However, they are both located in Area C, meaning they are under Israeli control. The two natural areas are separated by the Har Gilo settlement, which the Israeli government has tried to enclose with a wall in the extension of the already existing separation wall for years (See Appendix I and Illustration 1 below). This means that there is often an Israeli presence in the area and that the land is under threat of annexation and confiscation. In addition to the grave consequences it will have for the residents in the area and farmers who will lose access to their land, it also means that RTM and all other residents in the Bethlehem area risk losing access to some of the only remaining nature areas (B'Tselem, 2014; B'Tselem, 2015).

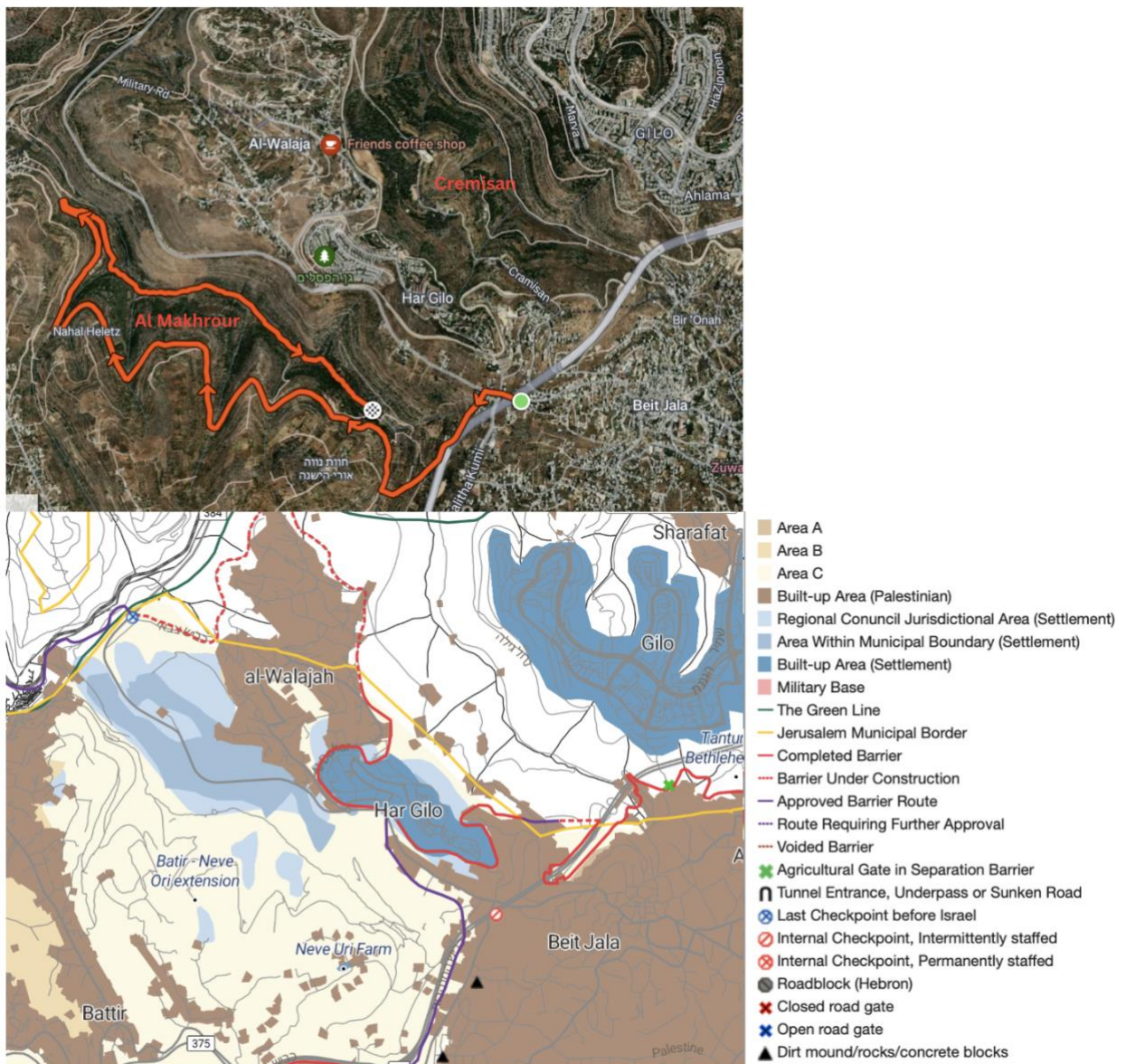


Illustration 1: Running route in Al-Makhroun (top picture) (shared with author by RTM participant, tracked on April 19, 2025) on map showing location of Al-Makhroun and Cremisan in comparison to B'Tselem's interactive map indicating settlement areas and wall constructions (<https://www.btselem.org/map>).

The interviewees described how, due to the cold, they sometimes meet in the warmer urban area of Beit Sahour during winter. However, this has become a more frequent practice since October 2023, as it has become increasingly risky for Palestinians to move around in Area C since then. Consequently, the group has also changed their hiking activities in recent years. A few times a year, the RTM community used to organise hikes or other longer excursions outside of the Bethlehem area. However, this practice has more or less stopped as people feel more unsafe, and movement restrictions have made it more challenging to organise.

In sum, the RTM community in Bethlehem is a group of people who meet twice a week to exercise together. There are no requirements to participate, and no official membership is necessary; everyone is welcome. While the organisers collect a small amount of money from participants to cover facility costs for the Tuesday practices, payment is not mandatory. They arrange social activities centred around exercise in various forms, mainly running, hiking, and muscle workouts, where everyone can participate, regardless of their physical shape, age, gender, religion, ethnic background, or political beliefs. Thus, it is a very low-threshold environment for people to socialise while caring for their bodies through exercise and being in nature. Many overlapping elements define the activities and motivations of the community, and each individual has a different experience being part of it. This thesis will analyse some of these experiences and describe what this reveals about the role of exercise in a militarised, settler-colonial context and how we may use this knowledge to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of living in violent environments.

4. Data, Methods, and Methodology

This section introduces the research methods used for data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations made throughout the research process. It also discloses reflections on researcher positionality and methodology. Lastly, this section also addresses the limitations of the study. Naturally, my personal experience participating in the activities of RTM Bethlehem has influenced my approach and methodological progress in ways that will be accounted for below. However, the research methodology of this thesis is primarily guided by a feminist approach to peace and conflict studies. Such an approach typically centres on individual narratives, lived and embodied experiences, and the everyday, mundane aspects of peace and conflict (Väyrynen et al., 2021). Accordingly, this research foregrounds these aspects by examining how an everyday practice – exercise – is experienced and narrated by individuals living in a violent context. The feminist methodology applied throughout the thesis will be accounted for in the sections below.

While acknowledging the gendered nature behind the destructive structures that drive war and violence (Mackenzie & Wegener, 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021), this research is not focused on gender, as the primary purpose of this study is to examine the participants' individual experiences and draw knowledge from them inductively³. Based on these experiences, the thesis will ultimately discuss how such knowledge can challenge the dominant understanding of war and the structures that drive it, based on feminist and decolonial theories. These research purposes invite the use of a qualitative research method, and the specific method chosen for data collection is in-depth semi-structured interviews (Brounéus, 2011). The interviews are analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and are related to theoretical knowledge mainly on an inductive basis. At the same time, a certain level of deductive reasoning has been used to sketch out a theoretical foundation and starting point for the analysis, as introduced in the literature review.

4.1 Data Collection: Interviews and Supporting Photographs

The data in this research is based on seven interviews (of which two were with George) conducted from November 2024 to February 2025. Before conducting the interviews, I reached out to George, the leader of the RTM community in Bethlehem, whose contact information I had from my previous visit. George helped me identify and establish contact with potential interviewees based on a set of criteria. The research participants had to be active in the RTM

³ For a gendered analysis of the context, see, for example, Elia, 2017; Pratt et al. 2025, or the work of the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC) (<https://palestinianfeministcollective.org>)

community, that is, participating in RTM's weekly organised exercise and social activities for a relatively long time, either in the present or recent past. In aiming for as broad a representation as possible within this limited number of participants, the representation of gender and age differences in the community was also considered. However, a significant limitation obstructing access to many in the RTM community is the language barrier caused by my inability to speak and understand Arabic. Due to this limitation, another criterion was that the participants were able to be interviewed in English.

Among the research participants were two women, Hiba and Sajeda, and four men: Elias, Jalal, Abdel, and George. Of these, I already knew Elias and George but had not been in contact with them since my latest visit to Palestine in the fall of 2022. The age range of the participants is 27 to 45. This does not represent the age range within the community, which is much wider, ranging from teenagers to individuals in their 60s, who join in their activities. The participants come from different backgrounds, and while they were not questioned about their ethnicity, religion, social class, or similar aspects, some shared specific identity markers throughout the interviews. Hiba, Elias, George, and Abdel live in Bethlehem and are currently active in the RTM community there. Sajeda used to be more active in the community but has recently moved and now participates sporadically. Jalal lives in Jerusalem but works in Ramallah and participates in RTM activities in both places. Before our interview, I did not know that Jalal was not part of the RTM community in Bethlehem. However, Jalal has organising roles in both individual communities and is also familiar with the Bethlehem community due to this involvement and the strong connection between RTM communities. Thus, the geographical context of Jalal's experience differs from the others; however, his general experience of exercising and being part of the community is equally relevant. Furthermore, the different geographical settings presented by Jalal are valuable for comparing and nuancing experiences throughout the analysis. Therefore, despite not being active in the RTM community in Bethlehem, Jalal's experience is included in the analysis.

Before the interviews, the participants received basic information about the preliminary purposes of the research but were not asked to prepare for the conversation in any way. All research participants initially decided to use their real names, although they were given the option to remain anonymous. The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, lasting between 25 and 65 minutes (See Appendix II). They were recorded and transcribed live with the built-in transcription services of these tools. While the live transcriptions helped save time, thorough corrections of the transcriptions and a second listen-through were needed. The interviews were primarily transcribed in verbatim style, meaning

that in most cases, I have not removed stuttering, repetitive words, or grammatical mistakes. In a few instances of repetitive stuttering within the same quote, I reduced the stuttering of words such as "I" or "it" when it disproportionately distracted from the content of the quote. I also omitted verbal sounds such as "uhm" or "mm" but kept the silent pauses indicated with three dots. When presenting quotes from the transcripts, any edits and unoriginal content are indicated in brackets, just as cuts are indicated with three dots in a bracket ([...]). Choosing a primarily verbatim transcription style allows for a higher level of personality and emotion to be displayed in the quotes, which I find essential for an analysis that centres on individual experiences, considering that emotions and feelings always shape our experiences.

After completing the analysis, each interviewee received a document containing extracts from their interviews included in this thesis, in some cases also including my interpretations and analysis of the quotes. This was primarily done to offer them a more informed basis for deciding on their anonymity, giving them a second chance to change their stance. Following this, two research participants (Elias and Abdel) chose to have their identities anonymised, and we agreed on the pseudonyms used in place of their names. Furthermore, it served as a secondary data processing phase in which the interviewees could elaborate on the extracts and comment on my interpretation. This process helped ensure that I had not misunderstood anything or reframed their words so that they could not identify with their statements. Thus, they were allowed to comment and elaborate on their quotes and my interpretation, but not to alter their quotes or my way of interpreting them. However, their comments naturally influenced my interpretation as they provided more information and deepened my understanding of their experiences.

Being guided by a feminist approach, I seek to practice "a reflexive methodological stand," constantly thinking reflexively about my positionality and power relations with the research participants (Björkdal & Selimovic, 2021, p. 41). This approach influenced how I set up the interviews and the atmosphere I aimed to foster during the conversations. I acknowledge the argument within FPR that there is no such thing as a neutral ground and that all research is affected by researcher positionality (Björkdal & Selimovic, 2021). I will reflect on my positionality in terms of the research in general later. However, I wish to point out here that I partly shared this positionality with the research participants during the interviews. I did this by sharing and drawing on my own experiences and, at times, expressing my understanding and perspective on certain questions and topics as they came up in the conversation. To establish a more "interactive relationship," which feminist researchers identify as a way to address power positionalities (Jacoby, 2006, p. 166), I engaged my own perspective and

positionality while also allowing the participants to ask any questions about the research and its aims. In doing so, I also attempted to keep the conversation informal and relaxed so as not to create any increased researcher-interviewee hierarchical distance.

Obstacles to this included the formalities of making contact, providing information, asking for consent, and setting up the interview on an online meeting platform. Since this setup resembles an official meeting, it is not exactly associated with informality. These elements of the data collection process inevitably counteract any efforts to establish an equal power relationship. However, a complete power balance between researcher and interviewee might not be the goal of this reflexive methodological approach. Instead, the purpose is that by practising reflexivity and being aware of power positions, you do not use such positions to diminish the agency and validity of the other's experience. Furthermore, a feminist methodological approach embraces the discomfort ingrained in the power relations encountered during the research, and, in turn, by engaging with these dilemmas, it strengthens the research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Björkdal & Selimovic, 2021). A reflexive view on power relations, dilemmas, and researcher vulnerability is a strength as it contributes to a continuous questioning of research ethics and power positionalities, an important normative aim of FPR (Björkdal & Selimovic, 2021).

Not only were the practical decisions influenced by feminist approaches, but the interview itself was also affected. Since the research purposes are guided by feminist methodology, which focuses on everyday and lived experiences, the topics addressed and questions posed to the interviewees were likewise determined by this methodology. I made it clear before starting the recording that, because this study centres on individual experiences, there are no wrong or right answers to the questions I might ask, and any experience they wish to share is considered valuable knowledge. The in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview is made up of a set of pre-defined questions. However, doing an in-depth interview also gives the researcher room to move more freely around the topic according to the interviewee's responses. By asking open-ended questions, participants can give as extensive an answer as they wish. They may open up new topics that are not directly related to the pre-formulated questions. The researcher can dig deeper into such a topic if relevant and then return to the pre-set questions later. A key component of in-depth interviews on the researcher's side is being an active listener and being capable of asking reflective follow-up questions. Thus, the researcher guides the conversation but is not bound to a rigid structure and frame, allowing for a more dynamic and naturally flowing conversation (Brounéus, 2011).

While the data analysis in this research primarily relies on inductive reasoning, the pre-formulated questions were based on a combination of preliminary research on the topic and my personal experience with the community and the context in which they exercise. Based on this, I identified three overarching themes: exercising in general and the participants' relationship with exercise, the physical space in which they exercise and their experiences moving within these spaces, and finally, the community and their experience of being part of it. Thus, I would ask the participants questions such as "What feeling does it give you to exercise?" "How would you describe the areas that you run/walk in?" or "How does it feel for you to be part of the RTM community?" Lastly, I invited the participants to share any additional thoughts or comments regarding our discussion, giving them an opportunity to highlight aspects that may not have been addressed but are important to them (See Appendix III). Thus, while the same overarching topics and questions were addressed in all interviews, they each unfolded in unique directions and opened up different aspects of the research topic.

In addition to the interviews, I use secondary data consisting of two photographs in the analysis, as I draw on the visual and symbolic expressions of the RTM community by incorporating the text on RTM's t-shirts. The prints on the T-shirts that RTM participants might wear are included in Appendix IV as photographs of both the front and back sides. I use the text and graphic illustrations on the T-shirts to understand how it conveys a symbolic message on its own, but also in co-construction with the bodies that wear them. Since this data is secondary and takes marginal space in the analysis where it is intended to support and contextualise the primary data, no separate method of analysis has been applied to the text or its visual expression.

4.2 Data Analysis

In this research, I have chosen thematic analysis as the method for data analysis. While thematic analysis is a broad terminology encompassing different methods for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data, I apply the reflexive approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2020). A reflexive approach is based on inductive reasoning, developing themes based on reflectivity in the interpretations and readings of the data. This approach acknowledges the role of the researcher's positionality and experience in relation to data processing. To elaborate, Braun and Clarke (2020) explain that "[...] themes cannot exist separately from the researcher – they are *generated* by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process" (p. 39, original emphasis). I find that this approach complements a feminist methodology and further allows for a reflexive approach throughout the data analysis process.

In addition, it acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity in interpreting the data and not only allows but argues for the unavoidable incorporation of the researcher's positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2020). I find this valuable in this specific research, given my relation to the topic, as it enables me to include these aspects reflexively without compromising the research's validity.

Relatedly, reflexive TA is a flexible approach that leaves many choices to the researcher. For example, it allows for a deep analysis of both semantic and latent themes in my data (Braun et al., 2016). Furthermore, although initially the aim of identifying patterns and themes might seem contradictory to a feminist understanding that values individual lived experiences and stories as knowledge (Björkdal & Selimovic, 2021), I argue that the method and methodology are compatible if only the way they are used in relation to each other is presented and explained. On that note, this study seeks to use reflexive TA to relate individual experiences to each other and to the situational and theoretical context. TA is valuable here in extracting the relevant parts of the data that help me answer the research questions, and then looking for similarities and latent but connected themes among the interviews. This also makes the presentation of the data more readable and understandable in relation to the context, while including extracts from the interviews makes it possible to still highlight the individuality of the lived experiences that form the basis of this research.

Thus, after transcribing the interviews, I followed the six steps of reflexive TA identified by Braun & Clarke (2020): "familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up" (p. 39). Despite what this simplified step-by-step linear definition of the process may imply, reflexive TA is a circular process of reflection and interpretation, constantly revisiting the data and deepening one's understanding of the content (Braun et al., 2016). I used the transcription process to gain an impression of the significance of the individual interviews and noted points of interest and curiosity. After re-reading the data several times, I began coding the interviews. As coding can be done in many ways, the method used in reflexive TA is rather organic and non-linear. I did not employ any "coding frame" (Braun et al., 2016) but worked through the data manually and allowed codes to transform and merge throughout the process. I used colour markers to group themes across the data and went back and forth between the data and colour codes to refine the themes and introduce new colour codes. Initially, I identified 20 codes, which I eventually narrowed down to the following five themes:

1. A Special Exercise Community for All
2. Exercising as Practising Freedom under Occupation
3. Accessing and Moving in Nature: An Ambivalent, Multilayered Experience

4. Moving with Symbolic Bodies – Displaying and Claiming ‘Palestinianism’ Despite Attempts of Elimination
5. “A Window of Hope and Light” – The Capacity of the RTM Community

Thus, these themes will provide the framework for the analysis section. In the initial writing-up process, each theme was written out in one coherent section. However, to enhance the readability of each theme, they were later divided into sub-sections. Thus, these sub-sections do not actually represent themes formed through the coding process but instead serve to organise the analysis and improve its readability.

In terms of writing up the analysis, Braun and Clarke (2020) point to the importance of finding a balance between extracts from the data and interpretative/analytic text. They distinguish between descriptive analysis and analyses with greater features of conceptual and critical analyses. The former approach typically includes a higher ratio of extracts, while the latter contains a greater ratio of interpretative and analytical text. In a more descriptive analysis, extracts are mainly used to illustrate and exemplify a claim. A primarily interpretative analysis, on the other hand, utilises extracts more analytically and engages directly with the text in the extract to derive meaning from it (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

My analysis and approach to reflexive TA is situated somewhere between the descriptive and interpretative. It is descriptive in that it aims to lay out the interviewees' individual experiences and allow them to describe their own lived experiences. As this is a central part of my methodological framework, the analysis needs to give room for an extent of their lived experiences to be shared in their original form and without interpretative interference, acknowledging that their experiences are knowledge in and of themselves. To achieve this, some extracts are used primarily illustratively, to let them describe their own experiences while I take on the role of messenger and summariser. However, this research also aims to contextualise these individual experiences and make sense of them in a broader scope, seeking to explore what they reveal about everyday life in this specific setting, with all its complexities, nuances, and contradictions. Thus, I combine a descriptive and an interpretative approach to make sense of these experiences in relation to one another and the spatio-temporal context in which they occur. For this reason, extracts are used both illustratively and analytically as I combine the two approaches in aspiration to answer my research question in alignment with my methodological commitments, which, as will be elaborated in the following section, centre lived experiences as knowledge.

4.3 Methodology

In essence, this thesis applies a FPR methodology. A commitment to a critical and reflexive approach, along with an emancipatory and normative objective, is key to this methodological framework. However, in a broader sense, FPR methodologies do not typically ascribe to a fixed paradigm and simply categorised ontologies and epistemologies (Wibben et al., 2019; Ackerly et al., 2006). Instead, feminist approaches seek to challenge dominating 'Western' worldviews and knowledge systems. In this way, FPR aims to decolonise "modes of thinking and decentre dominant modes of knowledge" (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021, p. 40). Thus, there are multiple ways to apply a FPR methodology, and a plurality of ontologies and epistemologies can serve as the basis for FPR.

The ontological framework that guides this thesis is one I define as relational, forming the basis for a feminist ethics of care. This normative approach understands humans as dependent, interconnected beings rather than independently functioning, sovereign individuals. A relational ontology and feminist ethics of care thus perceive all humans as related by this care ethic, which seeks to nurture a culture of peace among humans rather than a culture of violence, individual competitiveness, and zero-sum outcomes (Pettersen, 2021). This understanding links ethics and care not only to interconnected individuals but also to the social and political systems in which we live and by which we are governed (Robinson, 2006). Thus, it allows us to uncover asymmetrical relationships of power and care across different contexts, from the individual to the global (Pettersen, 2021).

Furthermore, a relational ontology calls for a reflexive approach on behalf of the researcher regarding their positionality and place within power dynamics. It rejects the notion of the researcher as neutral to their research because humans are relational, exposed to interference from other subjects and a dynamic, changing world (Ackerly et al., 2006; Wibben et al., 2019; Väyrynen et al., 2021). In this sense, our worldviews and perspectives are shaped by our personal and social interactions. Epistemologically, this thesis is grounded in the study of lived realities and embodied experiences, contrasting with other approaches that centre analysis on a visible, observable truth (Wibben et al., 2019; Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021). In this regard, FRP considers personal stories and narratives to be a valuable form of knowledge. In giving space to the experiences of individuals with intersecting identities and marginalised voices, and viewing the everyday as a site of knowledge, this approach seeks to understand experiences of violence and inequality (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021). In summary, this methodological framework is based on a reflexive, relational, and critical approach that emphasises lived experience in the situatedness of the everyday. In the following sections, I

will further reflect on researcher positionality and ethical considerations as part of this methodological commitment.

4.3.1 Researcher Positionality

Central to doing feminist peace research is the process of continuously reflecting on one's positionality and privilege while also thinking reflexively about how this shapes your own beliefs and assumptions, and consequently, the research process. As a white woman with a Nordic background, it is important for me to acknowledge the past and present oppressions and silences that are the ramifications of the privilege that comes with this background. Feminist thinkers, such as bell hooks, have pointed out how such oppression and silencing come about through an interplay of various mechanisms, including white supremacy, capitalism, militarism, and patriarchy (MacKenzie & Wegner, 2021). Furthermore, scholars have pointed out how Western feminism, infused with these mechanisms, has at times contributed to the reproduction of oppressions and hierarchies (Mohanty, 2003; Choi, 2021; Lazic & Stavrevska, 2024). As a Western woman conducting feminist research, I aspire not to become associated with the typical shortcomings of Western feminism. I am also an inexperienced researcher who has not been in the field long enough to fully recognise all the risk points and pitfalls. I strive to compensate for this by practising self-reflection, and my initial practice was to ask myself: Why am I doing this research, and should I be doing this research? Since I do not want to reproduce these mechanisms, how do I avoid speaking over or taking over the narrative of my research participants, and how do I critically address harmful structures, including those I am inevitably engaged in, that contribute to the ongoing violence committed against them? These are the questions I seek to address in this section.

In addressing the first question of "why and whether," I emphasise the understanding of Hudson (2021), who argues that to end wars, we must take on the approach that "war is an activity that we are all connected to in real ways and therefore have a mutual responsibility to resist" (p. 29). She goes on to state that "war is not just someone else's problem to solve; we all need to be active, caring participants in bringing about the end of wars" (p. 30). I understand war not only as full-scale direct war but also as the continuous everyday and colonial violence that amounts to war, or war against a people, which is how many Palestinians experience the situation in question here. This is described, for example, by Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi (2017), who understands it as "the last colonial war, one waged against the indigenous population of Palestine" (p. 15). Reflecting on Hudson's approach, I understand this research as a way for me to actively engage in a discussion about how to end violence and oppression

while simultaneously criticising the oppressive structures and systems that enable it and that I engage with during my day-to-day life. In that sense, rather than asking why and whether I should do this research, the central question is "how."

Accounting for one's positionality and acknowledging one's privilege is meaningless if not reflected in, and followed by, the choices made throughout the research. The first choice I made was, of course, to be guided by a feminist methodology. This means adopting a way of producing knowledge that acknowledges the participants' experiences as valid contributions to knowledge. In aspiring to give the reader this impression when reading the data, I have had many thoughts on how not to assume control over the participants' experiences so that they stand as knowledge on their own, isolated from my interpretation and analysis. I do not wish to rewrite their narratives to fit a Western voice and worldview; yet, it is my task as a researcher to interpret data, and I do so from this position. However, I also interpret it from a place of familiarity and solidarity, drawing on my own experiences and memories to make sense of and relate to the data. As I have engaged with the community, participated in their activities, and moved in many of the same spaces, I have formed an embodied experience of the studied context. Moreover, while my embodied experience inevitably influences my understanding and interpretation of the interviews, only the interviewees' experiences can be considered a relevant source of knowledge for my research purposes. In this sense, my experience with and knowledge of the context and community does not alter the data, but it is important to acknowledge it as part of my positionality. Thus, some steps I have taken to avoid assuming control over the interviewees' experiences include practising reflexivity, being transparent about my positionality, emphasising direct quotes in the analysis, and making clear when I draw conclusions based on my own understanding. I do not claim to have succeeded in balancing these positions and making better, less harmful choices, but I make an attempt.

As part of the secondary research purpose of this thesis, I wish to expose the experiences and knowledge held by my participants to western-dominated approaches and understandings to show the need for an alternative way of approaching and understanding war and violence – as something that is experienced and lived. I find it necessary to question these approaches and understandings because they drive the systems and structures that continues to fail when it comes to ending war and violence. These sentences by MacKenzie & Wegner (2021) in the introduction to the book *Feminist Solutions for Ending War* capture this well:

*War is a complex failure of human ethical and moral commitments to each other.
War is a complex failure to create political solutions that would enhance the
capacity for humans and animal species not only to thrive and survive, but also to*

live in a safe environment that is protected and respected. War is a complex failure situated within, and a product of, a patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist and militarist system (p. 9).

Dismantling this system means that we must change how we conduct research and how decisions are made in political arenas. In this thesis, I aspire to carry out research that challenges Western knowledge systems and traditional methods of analysing conflict in terms of military strategy, cost-effectiveness, or inter-state power dynamics. By offering an alternative to Western knowledge of war, I also wish to promote a different approach to political decision-making inspired by a feminist ethics of care, one that centres on the experiences of lived beings and their needs. In doing so, I wish to reject the normalisation of militarisation, colonial occupation, and the perceived necessity of war and everyday violence, as I understand this to be an essential aspect of conducting feminist and anti-colonialist research (MacKenzie & Wegner, 2021). Thus, in the discussion section of this thesis, I address the question of how to challenge destructive and violent structures, including those I am inevitably involved in during my day-to-day life.

4.3.2 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

In this section, I will address the ethical considerations made throughout the process, as well as the limitations of this study due to my positionality and the methods used. It is important to note that the session above also reflects an ethical discussion, albeit on a more theoretical level. Furthermore, I aim to conduct reflexive research by continuously being transparent about any reflections on issues that may arise throughout the thesis and not just in one section. Nevertheless, this section addresses the more practical choices made regarding ethics and safety.

Firstly, before conducting the research, I considered whether researching this specific context was ethically justifiable, given that Palestine is understood to be an over-researched area. As this has led to research fatigue in some communities (Myrsep, 2022), I tried to get to know the previous research better. However, I primarily relied on the information provided to me by George to assess whether doing this research would contribute to this trend. However, getting permission and endorsement from George to do this research was central to me in the first place, as he was one of the movement's founders. Therefore, I reached out to him, and we had a preliminary call in which I explained the purpose and approach of the study. George confirmed that my approach differed from the usual methods applied to research in Palestine and that there was potential in looking into the role of exercise. Thus, I received permission

and support from George to conduct the research, for which I am very grateful. Due to his important position as the one who granted permission for this research and his role as my person of access, George's influence on this research needs to be acknowledged. Especially in the interviewee selection process such key persons can play a role in determining whose voices are included and excluded. Relying on so called 'gatekeepers' always involves a risk that such key people are driven by a conscious or unconscious agenda that favours or promotes one group of people or a certain view (See, e.g., Sixsmith et al., 2003, pp. 583-4; Morris, 2015, pp. 61-2; Dempsey et al., 2016, pp. 483-4). George established contact between potential interviewees and me and thus had great influence selecting whose experiences are included and excluded in this thesis. While his position and knowledge is paramount in terms of accessing and selecting a credible and representable set of participants, it is also important to acknowledge the possible bias and potential implications of George's role on this thesis.

In taking the following steps after the interviewee selections, I strived to make what Brounéus (2011) refers to as an "ethically-informed risk assessment" (p. 141). This refers to the safety of the participants and the risks that they are exposed to by taking part in the research (Brounéus, 2011). In this case, I specifically considered whether participating would have any consequences for the participants and whether I risked asking questions that might trigger any traumas. In terms of the former, I naturally ensured that the participants were properly informed about the study and their right to withdraw at any point. They independently decided whether to be anonymous or not. I let this be up to the participants themselves because they are better judges of the personal risks of participating than I am. They may not want to be anonymised but rather come forth as the sender and narrator of their own story. This is an aspect that I do not wish to take from them if they assess that the risks for them in doing so are worth running. Of course, this is based on an overall assessment that the potential risks are relatively small and not life-altering.

Considering which questions to ask is also an act of an ethical nature as you assess what information is necessary for the research and whether you can obtain this information without risking and needing to revoke past traumas (Brounéus, 2011). The overarching topics of the interviews are not trauma-inducing or sensitive in themselves. However, due to the context in which the participants live and exercise, they are confronted by Israel's occupation and all that it entails in everything they do. Consequently, some aspects can potentially be sensitive to the participants. However, by asking open-ended questions, the participants can decide what and how much to share. Relatedly, I ensured that there was a sound interview structure and a set of

pre-defined questions to gently guide the conversation back to, so as not to prolong any discomfort or put the responsibility on the interviewee to move forward.

One of the limitations of this study and a challenge to establishing a relation between the participant and researcher is the physical distance and disembodiment of the interview setting. The physical distance and the fact that the interviews are conducted online make it difficult to assess and read each other's body language, detect changes in the tone of their voice, and notice other non-verbal communication cues, thereby making it hard to sense when the other is feeling discomfort. This means that one needs to be particularly careful during the interviews and to pay extra attention to this aspect when conducting interviews online (Hooley et al., 2012).

Another significant limitation of the study is the language barrier between the participants and me as a researcher. There are two important aspects to this. First, conducting the interviews in English limits the number of potential participants. Consequently, representation may have been restricted as only participants able to converse in English were considered. Secondly, by not conducting the interviews in the participants' first language, they inevitably alter their vocabulary and expressions. This limits their ability to express themselves authentically, as language "carries accumulated and particular cultural, social, and political meanings that cannot simply be read off through the process of translation" (Temple & Edwards, 2002, p. 3). Using a translator would have solved the first issue, but not the second. Using a translator brings other challenges, as the translation process creates further distance from the original meaning and message, which is also influenced by the translator's positionality (Davies, 2002). Due to a lack of resources, a potential translator would likely have been part of, or familiar with, the community. Moreover, having an additional person in the room who has a relation to the participant may affect the dynamics and responses of the participants. Thus, without the means to hire a professional translator, I weighed the factors and chose to conduct the interviews in English, being aware of the implications this would have for the validity of the study.

Lastly, it is important to note the limitations due to the scope of the study. While the thesis does not aim to draw generalising conclusions based on large datasets, I have at times found myself needing to scale down and exclude valuable content. For example, a more significant role could have been given to the visual and symbolic expression of RTM through a more extensive analysis of their logo and the graphic illustrations on their t-shirts. Similarly, although I limited the number of interviewees to six, I would have liked to include more quotes and allow more space for the individual participants to come through with their personal stories

in the analysis. Furthermore, while conducting a cross-community study that included members of RTM in different cities would have been interesting, I chose to limit the study to the Bethlehem community. I made this choice because explaining different contexts and the challenges faced by the communities would be too extensive for a master's thesis. Thus, I focused on one community and the experiences of militarised settler-colonialism as it manifests in the Bethlehem area, acknowledging that it is experienced differently and creates distinct implications in other locations.

5. Analysis

In this section, I present the findings of the reflexive TA. The five main themes that emerged from the analysis (introduced in section 4.2) are presented in an order that naturally moves from a ‘narrow’ perspective on the RTM community (theme 1) and the individual experiences of exercising (theme 2) to a broader perspective that considers the spatiotemporal and socio-political context (themes 3 and 4). Lastly, the final theme connects these themes and addresses the capabilities and potential of the RTM community to impact individuals and society, illustrating how the RTM community and exercise are used to navigate, challenge, and change individual and collective experiences of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context. This chapter ends with a conclusion in which I re-engage with the primary research question and the corresponding sub-questions.

5.1 Theme 1: A Special Exercise Community for All

The first theme centres around the community and RTM initiative as something unique and special in the context of Palestine and the WB. In the interviews, RTM emerges as a distinctive space and community for the participants in one way or another, offering them something they cannot get anywhere else. In this sense, it seems that the vision of the founders, which George presents here, has been fulfilled: “[...] we did not need to offer the people in the West Bank to come and emphasise the occupation. We needed to offer, offer an opportunity for something delightful and fun and, and energetic that is not available around us.” Beyond its uniqueness due to the unavailability of similar initiatives, the following section will explore the elements that make this community special, both in general and for each individual.

5.1.1 Encouragement, Inclusivity, Energy, Spirit – Belonging to the RTM Community

Starting with Sajeda, her first thoughts on what she likes about RTM illustrate quite well why RTM is special within the broader community, but also to her individually:

[...] it was a nice idea for me, like, to have a group of youth, where we meet together in a comfortable place, I could feel that I'm comfortable to be with those people. Especially that, like, working out in public places is not a very common activity in our society, but I could feel that being with this group gives me power and, like, encourages me to continue, and I could feel that nobody can judge me from this group [...].

This extract indicates that it is not only the activity (exercising in public) that represents a special opportunity. The social aspect and the fabric of this specific community is also

something special, as it has features beyond being an exercise community. It is also a community that is nonjudgmental, comfortable and empowering to be part of, and which opens an opportunity to comfortably exercise in public in a society where doing so is not very common.

The sense of community and the aspect of being part of a community are elements that all the participants highlighted in different ways when reflecting on why they continue to attend RTM activities. Abdel, for instance, refers to the importance of belonging:

[...] it is the feeling of belonging. Human being is a social animal according to sociology, and usually, human being likes to be part of a group. So, this kind of belonging to a group, belonging to Right to Movement, belonging to some group that you like. It gives you this kind of – a nice good psychological feeling that you are accepted by a group [...].

Beyond the importance of being part of a community, Abdel points out the feeling of belonging to a group that he *likes*, not just *any* group. Thus, this community has characteristics that its participants appreciate and value, which makes it a community they want to belong to. Elias, for example, highlights the spirit: “[...] it's the spirit, I think, it makes you continue,” while Hiba refers to the energy she receives and gives back in a different form: “[...] what made me come back is basically the energy of the people there. [...]. I welcome that energy, and my body gives it something else in return, it gives power, it gives encouragement, it gives love.”

Furthermore, a recurring theme in the interviewees' descriptions of the community is openness and inclusivity. Elias, for example, says that “[...] whether a man or you're a woman, you're old, you're young, you're weak, you know. [...]. A thin or heavy, or whatever, short, tall. It doesn't matter. They accept you, they welcome you.” Hiba's experience of participating in the Tuesday workout sessions partly illustrates how this manifests in RTM's activities:

I see myself with extra energy running around with people and you know, because I'm not really that fit. So, I'm not really strong enough to run a full court. I just stay behind people and cheer them. This is what I see my body doing. Yes, I do the exercises. I, I don't... I do everything I'm asked to do, but at the same time, I like running around people cheering them. Yallah, let's go. We can do it. [...] So, my brain receives that challenge. My body's not really able to do it because I physically can't, but it makes me laugh because I, I look for people who are like me in the workouts, so I go to them, I stay with them. We encourage each other [...]. For me, it's... See, I'm smiling while I'm talking about the workout [...]. I don't really know what happens inside my brain when I'm doing that, but I know that I am happy.

What Hiba describes, along with her supportive and encouraging engagement with the other participants, reveals a community that, although based on exercising, does not pay attention to its participants' ability to do the exercises fully or correctly. Rather, it is a community that values individuals' capacity to encourage and support one another, fostering and sharing positive energy. This illustrates that it is an exercise community where positive energy and attitude are prioritised over mere physical performance. What matters is that everyone leaves feeling good, regardless of whether they completed all the exercises flawlessly or not.

Hiba and George are both individuals who excel in supportive and encouraging roles during RTM's activities, and the community relies on the energy that the organisers put into it. This becomes clear from my interview with Abdel, who gives credit to George for encouraging him to join RTM, as well as for George's welcoming nature and his work with RTM in general. When interviewing George, it is evident that inclusivity has always been and continues to be one of the central values of the community and the RTM project. When asked how he would describe the community in general, George says: "Diverse, inclusive. Equal, everybody's equal. It's for everybody. Right to Movement is for everybody. It is liberal. It gives everyone an opportunity in a way. Open for everybody." The previously presented extracts illustrate that the community is indeed experienced as a welcoming, inclusive, and nonjudgmental group by the interviewees. Although there is some overlap, what George adds is its diversity and liberal approach, which the next section will address in more detail.

5.1.2 A Diverse and Liberal Community

These elements add another special aspect to this community as it becomes a point of interaction between different groups within society. As the interviewees highlight, it consists of men, women, Christians, Muslims, locals, internationals, and people with differing economic resources. The community can serve as an important space to get to know new perspectives, be exposed to other opinions, and make sense of your place in the broader society. George presents this aspect during our conversation: "[...] to me, it's a representation of society. Different perspectives, and different, so it helps me, it helps me navigate my place and thinking around people. Observing how people... Like, the mindsets in our society and where I place in it [...]." Thus, this openness to everyone, which results in a diverse group of people, can have a very enriching effect on the participants, as this exposure can help them better understand other people's perspectives.

Abdel points to the open and liberal approach of RTM as being part of what made it an appealing community for him. Abdel highlights that, "In Palestine, the whole atmosphere is

saturated with politics, so everything is political,” but what he likes about RTM is that it is both a non-political and non-religious group. This encouraged him to join, and he decided to stick with the group as he experienced how, “they are not discriminating people, they adapt the open-minded mentality. And they are welcoming.” Thus, in a space of intense politicisation, the RTM community is special because it offers a non-politically aligned space for social engagement.

Furthermore, both Hiba and George emphasise to me that RTM is intended as a community where you can share your thoughts and discuss what is going on in society. This means that you may encounter opinions that do not align with your own, and in rare cases, with RTM’s message. Thus, in a politicised context, they have also had to deal with and have uncomfortable discussions about how to act on certain incidents. While the most difficult discussions have been related to the RTM groups inside Israel, as they navigate a different socio-political and spatial environment, there are also many different and contradictory perspectives and opinions among Palestinians in the WB. As highlighted by George, this applies to the RTM community in Bethlehem as well. The following extract is from my conversation with Hiba, in which she talks about how RTM deals with these dynamics:

There's always the controversial side. You can't really control what people, how they think about stuff. But you make sure that you give that space to people to express their feelings. [...] Yes, you have to be respectful. There were times where I had to talk to people and tell them you're not being... You're not following the value of Right to Movement [...].

Thus, there is a fine balance between this liberal, open-minded approach of RTM and upholding a safe, respectful space in which people can express their feelings. Even though RTM are not politically aligned, they exist in a difficult, politicised environment, as Abdel mentioned. Being an open-minded, diverse and liberal community and practising such values is not easy in such a setting, but they try their best to find a balance. Although the interviewees only represent a small part of the RTM community, their experiences together shape a picture of a community that is about more than simply exercising. In this sense, the RTM community offers something special, not just because they exercise in public, which may be seen as unusual in this context. It is also special because it brings together and welcomes different people in a comfortable, open-minded space that, by value and praxis, aims at embracing everyone’s physical abilities and personal opinions.

5.1.3 Opportunities for Personal Development in a Flexible but Consistent Community

RTM is portrayed in the interviews as a flexible space accommodating varying levels of engagement. Participants can simply attend to join in the activities, but it also fosters a community that encourages deeper involvement in social activities and assuming roles of responsibility. Here, Jalal explains both why this community matters to him and how it led him to take on organising and leadership roles:

[...] it [having a community] makes you want to be more involved. And, you know, after 2016, after joining the group, like, as years passed, like, I was so committed to the group that I wanted to volunteer as a trainer for workouts. [...]. I feel like it's great to have a community of people who feel the same way that I do, who can encourage me to run more, to push my limits. [...]

While this extract from our interview conveys the importance of being part of a community in facing challenges together, it also highlights how finding a community you can identify with can inspire you to take on roles of responsibility, thereby contributing to the community. Similarly, George and Hiba both emphasised in the interviews how RTM offered them an opportunity to embrace new roles and grow as individuals. Hiba, for example, said:

He [George] assigned this role to me and I really took it to heart that I am a leader now. I have to organise the people, I have to mobilise them. [...]. I have to be up to that challenge. Again, it's a challenge after a challenge, after a challenge which makes you more involved in a community sense and community life. So that's why I'm happy.

Here, Hiba emphasises how with every challenge she meets, she becomes more involved in the community. Hiba later adds that: “I’ve never [had] the chance to be, to practise myself as Hiba, as a social person anywhere else than Right to Movement because it gave me the chance to do that.” This way, Hiba gets to experience herself in a more committed social role, learning to manage several challenges and develop her social and leadership skills. George says that “Right to Movement offered me an environment to grow and develop,” and discussing how to encourage people from families who are not engaged in activist or political activities, he draws on his own background and states that “[...] without Right to Movement, I would struggle to see what would be my entry point to become an activist. There's not many platforms that are offering opportunities to engage with that, and it felt like it's a safe space.” In this sense, it became a place where George had the opportunity to engage in activism and social and political issues, which may also inspire others to do so.

This way, RTM has become an important part of George and Hiba's personal growth process and their lives. This is also reflected in how they both address the community as a family. George expresses it like this: "[...] it becomes a family. It becomes, with its good parts and bad parts somehow." Thus, George acknowledges that a family has positive and negative dynamics, but he cannot imagine his life without the RTM community, as if he is connected to it on a deeper level. The way Hiba refers to RTM as a family highlights the care and support within the community while also revealing her caring and sentimental character, which is something they benefit from.

The love that I have seen in this community and how it grew for the past few years, it's just amazing. It's like raising a family, it's like having 2-3 babies and seeing them growing up and you're proud of them. It's that sentimental to me. [...]. Maybe, it's not for other leaders, but maybe because the female aspect of me and the feminine side comes out and I'm like, oh, Habibi is everybody I like.

However, it is not a fixed family. The people in it change, and George reflects on the continuous change of participants, as people come and go in a flow that fits with their lives; all the while, the essence of the community remains the same:

And it's strange because the people are not the same [...] They disappear for two years and then you see them back committed for two more years and then they disappear again. [...] Just, it doesn't matter. It just feels like I don't miss a specific person in it. It's just the feeling of the community being with you, a community.

In this way, the community (or family) is flexible to change, which is something Hiba also talks about embracing when referring to herself as part of "the new generation," although she enjoys welcoming back the 'old' ones returning after years away from the community. The community spirit and the familiar feelings thus remain constant – they are consistent despite changes in membership. Consequently, RTM's participants can engage at different levels and at various times in their lives, as it remains accessible and available. As a volunteer-based community, RTM relies heavily on the abilities, characteristics, and commitment of its volunteer leaders. However, for those of my interviewees who have taken on roles of responsibility within the community, it has also provided them with opportunities to grow and challenge themselves.

By offering this unique exercise community, RTM may also help its participants become more aware of their health and motivate them to prioritise it. Elias tells me that since he doesn't like to exercise "like in a, you know, indoor closed gym with a specific kind of exercise," RTM was something different, and because it was in a group, he felt more motivated. He also shared with me that when he joined RTM's activities, he became more aware of his lifestyle choices

and made changes. Exercising with RTM also encouraged Sajeda to be more active and exercise on her own: “[...] it encouraged me to, to work out at home, like, during the week also, so I can keep my muscles working.” Thus, the community may also serve to open up a different kind of personal growth, where its participants become more aware of their lifestyle and the physical as well as psychological benefits of exercising.

5.1.4 An Accessible Alternative

The practical structure of RTM’s activities is one of the enabling factors that makes it easier for people to participate in the activities and benefit from them. Abdel, for example, highlights how the low threshold of RTM’s activities and the fact that they occur only two days a week make it easier to commit, which is important as he stresses that “with time and when people get older, they have lots of responsibilities and they... Sometimes they have less commitment to other things, especially toward themselves and toward their body.” Another practical condition that increases RTM’s accessibility is that it is free for everyone and that there are no bureaucratic or binding conditions for participation.

[...] there's like, really no bureaucracy. You know, you don't have to sign for [...], you know, fill in and just to pay for one month. [...]. So, whenever you're ready, you can go and show up and that's it. Even like sometimes 5 or 10 shekels, they collect on Tuesdays, it's optional. (Elias)

These extracts illustrate how the practical structure of RTM and the activities it provides make exercising more accessible, manageable, and enjoyable for its participants. For instance, for those who dislike working out in a gym, or someone who is not interested in joining a basketball team that requires mastering specific skills and committing to practice three days a week, RTM offers something more interesting and dynamic, an alternative. These elements are part of what makes RTM a special and unique opportunity for its participants.

5.1.5 The Empowerment of Community and Connecting Palestinians Through Exercise

Referring back to the extract of my interview with Sajeda (p. 45), where she talks about being comfortable exercising in this group, illustrates how the community can act as a shield against social judgment. Additionally, Abdel mentions that it is safer to visit Cremisan or Al-Makhrour as a group, while Jalal shares that there are days when he does not feel comfortable running alone in Jerusalem. Although the external factors will be elaborated on later, it is a recurring theme in the interviews that the participants feel safer or empowered when they go in a group, which is part of why they value this community.

However, there is another empowering aspect of exercising with this community, which was amplified by Jalal. To Jalal, what makes RTM special is the feeling of being connected to other Palestinians and their roots – a feeling that the community gives him:

Like, I appreciate the health of the physical and mental health aspects [...], but also how we connect us to our roots, to our homes in Jerusalem and how we connect it to the [...] Right to Movement in Bethlehem and Ramallah, and the whole idea of the Right to Movement group.

Thus, for him, running and participating in activities with RTM represents an alternative way to feel connected despite the physical disconnection between Palestinians, such as between Jerusalem and the WB. “[T]he idea of being connected” is also something Elias emphasises, which is implicitly present in the other interviews as the symbolism linked to their practices is pointed out. The community, representing a connection to other Palestinian communities in combination with its exercise practices, is special because it offers participants a creative form of expression through something they enjoy doing together.

In conclusion, this section has demonstrated that the RTM community is special and unique on several levels. It is unique because it is the only one of its kind, but it is the special spirit and energy of the community, along with its characteristics of being inclusive, accessible, diverse, and liberal, that make it special to its participants. It is a flexible social community composed of a diverse group of people that values and encourages positive energy and encouragement. It is a unique exercise community because it is not only about exercising. As Hiba expressed, “There is more to Right to Movement than just exercising.” What this ‘more’ is depends on who you ask, as each participant gains something special from being part of this community and participating in its activities. What is common for all of them, though, is that they experience the community as being open-minded, inclusive, and accessible, which makes its participants feel included, welcomed, and empowered.

The experiences that this analysis is based on represent a very small part of the community, which is important to keep in mind. However, they do represent people with diverse backgrounds, opinions, perspectives, and approaches to engaging in a community. The RTM community seeks to embrace such differences and provide a space for people where they can share opinions, meet new people, and engage with different perspectives, as well as exercise together. If you seize the opportunity, it is a community that can make you challenge yourself and grow, but it is also a place where you can prioritise your physical and mental well-being. What being part of the RTM community entails greatly depends on individual interests, needs, and characteristics. This flexibility creates a unique space in which you can both receive

what you need and share what you have to give. For example, you can go and share your energy, frustration, encouragement, or care, while in return receiving a sense of belonging, connection, motivation, or purpose. RTM exists as a community where a plurality of such exchanges takes place, and the experiences presented here reflect that, at the end of the day, the community offers something meaningful and valuable – something special.

5.2 Theme 2: Exercising as Practising Freedom under Occupation

While the first section focused on the RTM as a community, this theme pertains to the individual experiences of exercising, what it means, and how the interviewees utilise it. Their experiences are shaped and influenced by the spatio-temporal and socio-political environment in which they exercise, as it affects Palestinians' bodies and everyday lives. In the interviews, the inescapability and ubiquity of the occupation appear to varying extents. George, for example, shares his experience of how “the occupation is so entrenched in our life, impacting us in every way, every way we move.” The theme developed here, however, centres on how the interviewees use exercise to navigate, mediate, and unmake what the militarised, settler-colonial setting seeks to implant in their minds and bodies. In this way, exercise emerges as a powerful everyday practice that offers a sense of freedom, hope, relief, happiness, or agency.

5.2.1 Long and Short-term Effects of Exercising in a Difficult Situation

An example of how this emerges in the data is presented in the following extract from my interview with Jalal, who puts into words what it means for him to be able to run:

It's, it's about mindfulness. It's about being able to... You know, exercise in a way that's, you know, spiritually empowering and relaxing and keeps you away from the, the really – the noise of life. [...] we're not living in the most perfect situation, as we all know. And we are living in a very, like, limited capacity, in prisons sometimes, and running makes you feel like you're free. You're able to go out to... Take care of yourself mentally through running. [...]. Something that's excellent for the mental health, also for the physical health, but also just to keep myself going all the time without feeling like despair or not being alone on the street.

Jalal emphasises the many positive effects of running, but especially that it is important for him because he can use it as a tool to take care of his mental health – it helps him relax, feel free, empowered, and keeps him going without feeling despair, despite the situation. Similar to Jalal's expression of keeping himself away from “the noise of life,” Abdel shares how exercising helps him shift focus from other thoughts and instead gives him a “good vibe”:

So, it's very important to [...] exercise and to move your body and at least once a week to get out all the sweating, all the negativities, everything. [...]. We play, exercise cardio, we run. It is a different story, and it helps a lot to keep you sane in this insane political situation where we live, and it gives you the good vibe.

Later, he elaborates on how exercise helps him navigate this “insane situation” by highlighting not just the immediate but also the longer-term effects of exercise: “it helps, sport helps you to feel healthier, and to be healthier. And once you are healthy, you are dealing with things different, differently. [...] you will have positive vibes within your mind and body.” Thus, Abdel also sheds light on the positive effects that exercising and being healthy have on him in terms of ‘dealing with things differently,’ and by doing so, demonstrates that it provides him with more than just an immediate or momentary effect – it also has a longer-term impact on his mental health, which aligns with Jalal’s experience.

Sajeda also describes how “when you are being active and exercising, it's different and you can feel it. Like, how, how you are active, like, doing your chores, like, daily chores [...] how are you active with people and willing to talk to, or just, or to socialise [...]” Hence, Sajeda experiences longer-term effects of exercising that manifest in her as having more energy to do her daily chores, interact with people, and socialise. Sajeda also shares with me how not exercising and longer periods of inactivity affect her body. Coupled with the “situation,” the negative effects manifest in her body through pain and tension. Sajeda explains how it has become increasingly difficult to move between Bethlehem and Hebron, and that this has hindered her participation in RTM’s activities, making her less active recently:

I could feel that my body is not the same because I stopped working out for a long while. And that makes me sad because I really want to like to go back to my active days with Right to Movement. But yeah, the situation is not helping now. [...]. I used to be more energetic and like, yeah, the context definitely affects when you when you keep watching the news and, like, I just go to work, finish my work, and also the posture, how I stay all the day, and I feel that all the pain and stress, it's all in my neck and shoulders.

These physical effects can be understood as a result of both the mental stress caused by the situation and the inactivity of the body. However, Sajeda’s experience also tells us that these factors are interconnected.

Prior to this, Sajeda shared how she feels her body getting stronger from exercising and that it helps her mentally in her day-to-day life. Similarly, not exercising also affects both her mind and body. Sajeda’s “situation” is both mentally demotivating and makes it practically

difficult for her to exercise with RTM. In referring to how watching the news affects her, we understand how she experiences both physical and mental barriers that make it harder for her to be more physically active. Despite not experiencing direct violence, the “situation” manifests in her as physical pain. Sajeda’s experience thus demonstrates how the militarised, settler-colonial context can manifest in the bodies it colonises without necessarily encountering them directly. It can interfere with their everyday lives, influencing their mental and physical energy, as well as manifesting through stress, tension, and pain, in both mind and body. However, her experience also shows us that exercising can be a very powerful tool to reverse or mitigate these effects, and that mind and body co-constructively work together in doing so.

Elias’s experience also testifies to this as he points out how exercise helps him ‘break the routine’ of the everyday. Like Sajeda, he is also affected by watching the news:

[...] yes, it's a stress relief. Especially when I have like a long day at work or you know, so many things going on like on the news and after you've been watching what's going on on the news for two or three hours, and then you feel that, oh, I want to do something and break this routine.

Elias’s phrasing of exercising as a ‘stress relief’ and a way to ‘break the routine’ resonates with the experiences of the other interviewees, although they all use different words to describe their specific experiences. Hiba, for example, understands her time exercising with RTM as one where she can enter ‘vacation mode’:

I am exercising but at the same time relaxing myself. My, my brain is like functioning as if it's on a, on a vacation mode. I'm happy, but I'm, I'm sweating, but I'm happy. [...] And you forget what happened during the day, because I remember on Tuesdays I have very busy days. So, I forget about my work. [...]. All the bad things and just focus on this workout and the people there. Just live the moment, yeah.

Hiba’s way of describing it and the closing words of her answer to my question (“Just live the moment”), represents a precise experience of Abdel’s explanation to me about how exercising is a great way to get a break from those thoughts that may otherwise stick in your mind, as it gives you something concrete to focus on:

It's about once you focus, it will be removed automatically, because the more you think you want to remove something from your mind, the more the more it is challenging and stubborn and stay in your mind. [...]. The best is to exercise because once you are like, towards, delve into the, the exercise, you will be separating those thinking, automatically. Like by default. That doesn't mean it will

not come on back [...], ideas keep coming to your mind, but all what you can do sometimes is to breathe, just breathe in breathe out and continue.

Here, Abdel's very rational way of explaining how exercising helps you refocus your thoughts or simply concentrate on breathing reflects the effect that others experience. In this extract, George explains how he experiences this effect as a 'disconnection':

[...]it has become, in a way, you can say the best hour of the day and it's not as much... To the physical aspects of it, but to the mental aspects of it, one being getting away from your phone. When I'm at Right to Movement, I take my glasses off and that like, I'm not seeing, basically, what's going on around me and I'm totally invested in, in the opportunity to, to just disconnect.

What is interesting about George's experience is that he practically and literally removes both his mental focus (from his phone) and visual focus by removing his usual visual senses (taking off his glasses). Instead, he channels this focus into exercise, the body, and connection with the people physically present around him.

Thus, all these experiences show how the interviewees go through a process of transforming their mental and bodily states when exercising. Rather than just a short-term, momentary transformation, exercising also enables a long-term transformation of both body and mind.

5.2.2 Control and Agency: Transforming Mind and Body

Exercising serves as a way for the interviewees to alleviate and rid themselves of something, while concomitantly helping them achieve a different state of mind and body, making a transition possible. This emerges vividly several times in the interview data. Sajeda, for example, describes how "the feeling after the exercise is very powerful and gives me a lot of dopamine and happiness, so yeah, I never regretted going to the workout or to the exercise." Abdel also refers to this transition by pointing out that he feels 'different' after recovering from exercise: "what happens is sometimes after any kind of heavy training the body will feel tired. But even later, when the body recovered, the body will feel happier. [...]. You, you feel you are different." Likewise, for Jalal, exercising and running is a way to release energy and manage feelings, here referring to anger: "[...] when we are running and releasing these energies, it's not like we're not angry anymore. It's just like we're managing our anger [...]." What he means by this is best understood by connecting it to what he shared earlier in the interview about running as a means to survive and cope, as well as a means of expression:

It's a very limited space but if I'm not running in the limited spaces that I have, then I feel like more suffocated [...], so it's, it's, it's necessary. It's like, really important, like drinking water or, like, eating healthy and running is just part of maintaining a balanced life just to maintain a good, a good living lifestyle under occupation [...] It's, it's not our choice, but running for us, it's a way to highlight that we have those restrictions on our life, daily lives in a way that are so limiting.

In this sense, running does not necessarily take the anger away, as Jalal points out, but it somehow mitigates it and redistributes the energy into action. This action turns into an act of reclaiming Palestinian presence and raising awareness about Palestinians' movement restrictions, while also functioning as a means of preserving health and exercising control and agency over one's life. Each of the participants may, of course, utilise exercise in different ways and to varying extents to achieve this 'change' or transformed mindset. Hiba, for example, points out to me that RTM and exercising are among many tools she can use to manage her everyday life and maintain a calm mindset, while for Jalal, it seems to play a more central role in his way of maintaining a good lifestyle and mitigating the militarised, settler-colonial context that he lives in.

In sum, the embodied experiences of the interviewees indicate that although they may not control or change the militarised, settler-colonial context, they can control and change something when they exercise. Acknowledging that exercise holds individual significance for the interviewees, it nonetheless serves as a means for them to take agency and transform how they feel both physically and mentally. Exercising gives them both immediate and long-term effects that help them improve their lives and well-being. In this sense, exercising becomes a way to unmake and disrupt some of the inescapability and ubiquity of the militarised, settler-colonial setting in which their everyday lives play out. Thus, for them, exercising becomes part of how they navigate everyday life, with all of the emotions and energies that their everyday encounters with the occupation bring to it. Exercising serves as a way to escape the inescapable and practice freedom under occupation.

5.3 Theme 3: Accessing and Moving in Nature: An Ambivalent, Multilayered Experience

A healthy living environment is essential for everyone, as well as for the RTM community, to whom access to nature and open spaces suitable for running, walking, and hiking is crucial. As described in section 3.3, the two main areas that the group visits on Fridays for their running and walking sessions are Cremisan and Al-Makhrour. RTM also regularly organises hikes in other parts of the WB, although this has become increasingly difficult and risky since October

7, 2023. This theme addresses the interviewees' experiences of moving within these spaces in a changing socio-political environment that has spatial manifestations, demonstrating how it involves a range of ambivalent feelings and includes complicated considerations.

5.3.1 Breathing and Suffocating Simultaneously

Most people can probably relate to the enjoyable feeling of being in nature, and having access to open, green spaces away from the city is something worth appreciating. Breathing in fresh air and escaping the city's noise also makes natural areas ideal for exercise. When asking George what makes it special for him to be in nature, he answers:

The, the nature, I mean the view [...]. It's just pretty and nice. It's clean. It's less chaotic than the city. It's the, there's a lot less crowd and cars and that just feels like the environment I want to be, I want to be in, and I don't want to be around cars and cars and smoke and beeping.

What George describes in the extract above represents one layer of the experience: the initial joy that most people automatically feel from being in nature. He describes the natural spaces in the area as pretty, clean, and calm, in contrast to the noisy and dirty city. To escape the city and move into a more relaxing environment, it is essential to have access to such spaces. However, in this context, not only accessing but also moving around in such spaces is often a complicated practice that leaves those doing so with ambivalence and multilayered feelings.

Similar to George's answer, Abdel describes how it feels to exercise in the surrounding natural areas of Bethlehem as follows:

It's beautiful. You feel yourself - it is the only place left in this government in Bethlehem where you, you have trees you have clean... Air, you see all those flowers and grass [...]. Nature itself gives me a positive vibe. So, imagine when you mix between nature and exercise. You have double positive vibes.

However, Abdel also describes how he sometimes gets a suffocating feeling when being there:

There are lots of, of rules and action steps on the ground by the Israeli occupation to take over these two places, Cremisan and Al-Makhrour, and to seize them for good, which means we will be prevented from going there at all. And this, every time I go there, I feel suffocated. When I think of the idea that I will not be able to access those areas again, it's the only areas with nature for us. So, it feels a lot for me to go and it feels a lot for me to go because every time I go there, also, I start thinking that I will lose, this my last breath of freedom... That I am breathing it there.

Thus, there are many feelings and concerns related to these places, both positive and negative. These locations evoke a sense of unpredictability, knowing that you may not be able to continue going there anymore at an unknown time. They are confronted with the risk of a future without access to nature as they move into these areas. In fact, their access has already been limited as settlements gradually take over what was previously a natural landscape (See Appendix I). Sajeda also describes how she was confronted with this reality when returning to Cremisan after a long time:

[...] first time I went to Cremisan after the war [in Gaza], it was very nice to see the nature again because we didn't reach that area for so long, and, yeah, it feels peaceful, and yeah, the smell of nature. Also, I was sad because I could see that more buildings are coming up from the settlement.

Even though it was pleasant for Sajeda to go back, it is also a place where they are confronted with the settler-colonial reality they live in, and the slow but constant transformation of the landscape due to the expansion of settlements in the area. Like Abdel, this development makes Sajeda question how long they will be able to access the area:

[...] that gives us a bad feeling that, like, are we, are we going to still be able to come here, like, in 10 years for example? So yeah, I'm really afraid when I think about this idea whether for Al-Makhrour or Cremisan, because I think it's the only remaining areas, like green areas, where people can go and enjoy the nature and go away from the chaotic city, and yeah, just to clear your mindset and go for something other than the city, or like, you know.

Thus, this aspect evokes a sense of loss related to their experience moving in these contested areas. It is both a loss that has happened already, is happening at present, and a loss bound to happen in the future. It is a loss of the opportunity to exercise in nature and of a place to which they feel a connection and have a rightful claim. Thus, it represents a loss of opportunity, of space, and of their rightful claim. Simultaneously, it leaves them with a suffocating feeling of being left in a confined, crowded, dirty, and noisy urban environment where there is no room to 'breathe clean air' and 'clear your mindset.' Furthermore, both Abdel's and Sajeda's experiences illustrate an unknown temporality, a process of which they don't know the speed and full scope.

The interviewees all see this process unfolding without knowing when the next steps will be taken, whether or when the process will reach its endpoint, and what this endpoint will look like. This uncertainty is also evident in my interview with Elias, as he shares how he cannot help but look at the settlements when he is there. He describes it as "[...] an area that

you feel that every time you go, maybe it's the last time you are going to see it, or one or two years more, and then we stop going there.” Likewise, Hiba observes how “year by year, the settlements are coming towards us,” highlighting the visibility of this process, which is so present in their experiences of moving in these areas.

Despite this, they keep going there, not letting the past, present, and future losses take away from their appreciation of the land. How Hiba describes this appreciation and the feelings it evokes in her to be in this space is both beautiful and revealing: “When I'm with Right to Movement and with people, I feel like the place is giving us a big hug because it's a big place. It fits us all. It fits us with all of our troubles, and all of our hardships, all of our emotions, the good ones and the bad ones.” I interpret Hiba’s experience of the place as if it is ‘giving us a big hug’ as an indication that this space is physically comforting for her. Its spaciousness has the capacity to hold and embrace the feelings that may arise or evaporate when getting exposed to nature, combined with the absence of interruptions and noise that encourages deeper conversations. I get to this interpretation by also considering other parts of our conversation. In this extract, Hiba goes deeper into the significance of the place and her experience of it:

It's a place that... You make memories in that place, but it's not only the memories, it's the sense of tranquillity and peace that you feel while talking to people under the trees. I mean, that's nice to have that around, to have that option when you're stressed. You go with a friend or with Right to Movement or by yourself and just walk and wander around.

In this sentence, she points out how the atmosphere and surroundings of the place create a sense of ‘tranquillity’ and ‘peace’ while talking to people. This is obviously an inherently positive state of mind to be in, as well as it may help alleviate feelings of stress and facilitate more meaningful conversations with others. Thus, as Hiba also points out, it is a space where she enjoys coming with others to talk in a relaxing and spacious environment, but also alone to just ‘walk and wander around’. Finally, what also unfolds from these extracts of Hiba’s experiences is that it is a space to which she and the RTM group are connected by memories.

While the memories and the connection to a place that such memories create are something that the settler-colonial project can never take away, it threatens to discontinue the creation of further connection and future memory-making. The constant expansion of settlements and walls, along with the changes to the landscape that this creates, provides a clear visual exposure of this threat when you move in these spaces, as some of the extracts presented above demonstrate. However, the interviewees also experience how moving in these places offers a break from the chaotic city, a space to breathe clean air, clear your mind, and find a

sense of peace and tranquillity. Thus, moving in these natural spaces is connected to both negative and positive emotions and experiences.

5.3.2 Immediate and Unpredictable Barriers and Dangers

So far, only the longer-term threats and concerns that the interviewees face when moving in these spaces have been addressed. In addition to this dimension, they also share how they have encountered the immediate and present practices of domination by the militarised settler-colonial project, which are also part of their experiences moving in these areas. These consist of physical barriers that more directly target their bodies and impede their immediate movement. Elias, for example, describes how they might meet ‘flying checkpoints’:

[...] sometimes you go there to that area you, you face some... Kind of flying checkpoint or, like, military cars. [...] it's in area C, you know - it's very close to the wall, to the "borders." So yeah, they are there most of the time. [...]. I remember also one time, so, I was also during COVID they, they made, it was like a flying checkpoint, and they made us turn around, go back.

Abdel similarly highlights how the natural areas are enclosed by walls, which makes it an unpredictable space: “like, in Cremisan, there's a separation wall, it is built from both sides. They only left the, the main street. So, in any moment, in five hours, they could just close all the thing.” Thus, because of these places’ location in relation to the physical barriers, Israel’s military posts and the settlements, there is a constant, unpredictable risk that you will encounter them when moving in these spaces. In addition to these unpredictable ‘flying checkpoints’ and potential road closures, what also became apparent in other interviews is that the space is highly influenced by the political situation and atmosphere. If there are tensions or violent outbreaks elsewhere, a spill-over may take place and influence other contested spaces. In my interview with Sajeda, she shares how this became evident following October 7th and the war in Gaza:

[...] directly after October the 7th, life almost stopped. We stopped going anywhere. Like, when we firstly came back to exercise, it was just inside Bethlehem [...]. But for example, Al-Makhrour, like Beit Jala, we stopped going there for a while. Also, Cremisan, it was closed for a while. And nobody dared to go there because it was very dangerous. And then slowly, slowly, we started coming back, but it's not comfortable as before, because at Al-Makhrour, there are many settlers who try to tease people and start going and coming back like around the runners or like people who are walking. So, it's not comfortable and it's still dangerous.

In this case, it is not the Israeli military but rather settlers who pose a risk and make the space unpredictable. Abdel shares an observation similar to Sajeda's:

[...] they start harassing everyone who is going there, which kind of put lots of pressure on us... To, to be careful sometimes to not go there because it is dangerous, because these are young people. Armed. If they say under any pretext that they felt threatened, they could shoot you and then you are dead.

These extracts illustrate the serious security risks related to moving in these spaces, posed not only by the Israeli military but also by Israeli settlers. Thus, navigating these areas is perceived as dangerous and potentially life-threatening, especially during times of increased tension, which adds a layer of fear and discomfort to their experiences.

5.3.3 Risk Assessment – Danger vs. Principle

Carrying out its activities in these spaces, the RTM community must deal with changing levels of tensions that shift according to events elsewhere (such as the war in Gaza) and the political situation. Since October 7th, 2023, this task has become increasingly difficult, as indicated by the extract from my interview with Sajeda above. The events on this day and those that followed, which included an increase in settler violence in the WB (See, e.g., Agha et al. 2024; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, August 28, 2024), changed their movement practices and forced them to consider and discuss safety regarding exercising in Cremisan and Al-Makhrour. During my interview with Elias, he shared how after these events, they began running in Beit Sahour, an urban area classified as area A, making it “relatively safe,” as he puts it. He shares his observations of the discussions back then: “It was a tough time and I remember, yeah, they have so many debates about, ‘let's go back.’ Part of it... Yes, it's dangerous, they say ‘ok, so, until when we postpone it,’ I mean, there should be a, there should be a time that comes, though, when they say, ‘ok, we have to go back.’” Hence, this is a context in which exercising needs to be carefully considered and planned, although it is impossible to predict when it is safe or not to do so in a specific space.

Although they eventually started exercising in the natural areas again, Elias assures me that “there are so many people, they, they're like, still sceptical or afraid to go there. [...]. because people they hear, they hear stories, they listen to the news, they watch videos. So, they say, oh, [...] ‘I don't feel safe. [...]. I don't want to take the risk.’” Hiba, who shares her perspective as a leader, confirms what the others experience and says that “we don't go there as comfortable as we used to before the war.” Moreover, Hiba also shares one of such stories

that Elias mentions as part of the reason people are still scared to go back, confirming that they are rightfully afraid:

[...] we went once to Al-Makhrour. After the war. It was so scary. We heard some gunshots. [...]. There was a bomb, but not a big one. And the flying objects of that [...] got into the shoes of my, our friend. He got a little bit injured. He's OK now, but we reported that, we talked about what happened. [...]. It was crazy. And you know, as a leader, you have the responsibility of keeping everybody alive (laughs) - At least. So, it was so scary.

While Hiba laughs, she also points out that she was scared and how she, as a leader, feels a sense of responsibility to, at a minimum, keep everybody alive – which, in a ‘normal’ setting should be a fairly easy task, making the situation so absurd that it is laughable. This extract demonstrates the risks of moving in these spaces; it also reveals how the RTM handles these challenges beyond simply assessing the situation on a day-by-day basis. When something does happen, they report it, talk about it, and adjust their practices. After this incident, Hiba tells me that they started going to Cremisan instead, which at that point was “kind of safe. But at the same time, the army, the Israeli army, can come at any time and ask us to leave. And they just do that for fun.” Thus, the organisers need to consider these different risks, especially during the recent years of intensified conflict, which further politicise contested spaces and make them dangerous to move in. Sajeda shares with me how this also influences RTM’s other activities around the WB, especially in Area C, which also encompasses most nature areas:

[...] we stopped doing any hikes [...] and I really miss that because usually hikes are located in area C which is, yeah, dangerous now and, like, it's full of settlers and you never know what happens, so it's a big responsibility when you have people with you. Also, I remember that we used to make, to do solidarity walks or solidarity runs, [...] so all of that stopped.

Thus, arranging activities, going for hikes, and accessing green areas becomes a matter of risk assessment, reading the level of tension and evaluating a constantly changing situation.

Despite these difficulties and risks, there is also a spirit of stubbornness and resilience that is central to these considerations and their way of navigating the situation. This becomes apparent, for example, in Elias’s observation of the debate in the RTM community when he notes that “there should be a time that comes, though, when they say, ‘Ok, we have to go back.’” Thus, it is not a question of whether or not to return; it is a question of when. Furthermore, when discussing the difficult situation and navigating uncomfortable encounters, Hiba states that it “kind of gives you the motivation to keep on going. [...] it's just something that we

always have to do and talk about.” Another example is Elias expressing that “You try not to give up, you know. By going there say ‘I don't give up on it till there is hope.’” Thus, going there also serves to encourage themselves not to give up and foster hope within themselves, while sending a message to the outside world as well. Reaffirming the importance of the place and their willingness to keep going there, Hiba states, with determination in her voice: “It's, it is a big place for us, and we want to maintain it. We want to have it, it's ours. We don't want anyone else to take it. So, our presence there means something.” This insistence also reflects a principal aspect of their considerations and risk assessments of going there. What unfolds from these statements, supported by other interviewees who point to the importance of continually claiming their presence on the land, is that while there may be risks related to moving in these areas, they go there as a matter of principle. If they do not actively claim their principal right to these places and continuously signal a Palestinian presence, there is an increased risk that their rights and presence may disappear even faster. If they do not resist, it becomes easier for the settler-colonial regime to seize opportunities to grab more Palestinian land. Thus, asserting their principal right to the land and the symbolism of being present there is another significant aspect of their experiences moving in these spaces. While I will address the symbolic presence in the next section, it adds an additional layer of meaning and motivation to the act of moving in these spaces.

In sum, their experiences of moving in these spaces are multilayered. Firstly, moving in green, open, natural spaces has many positive impacts on the interviewees. Their experiences of moving in Cremisan and Al-Makhrour give them a sense of freedom, cleanliness, and tranquillity, in contrast to the noisy and chaotic city, making it crucial for them to access these remaining natural areas (beyond the fact that they *should* be able to access them as an intrinsic right). They presumably share this instinctive appreciation of nature with many others who spend most of their everyday lives in urban areas. Beyond this first layer, several elements make the interviewees' experiences of exercising and moving in natural spaces different from a 'normal' experience. While moving in these spaces, they also confront the inescapability of the occupation—the stable, long-term, as well as the immediate, unpredictable aspects of the militarised, settler-colonial context in which they live. They are visually confronted with the gradually increasing restrictions on their movement and the slowly changing landscape, progressing within an unpredictable and unknown timeframe, evoking a feeling of loss. Moreover, their movement practices in these areas are associated with insecurity, risk, and unpredictability, causing them at times to move with discomfort and fear. Their experiences include prior risk assessments and are influenced by a steadfast will to demonstrate their

rightful presence on this land despite safety concerns, as a matter of principle. When defying such risks and fears on a principled basis is understood as an act of dismissing the imposed control and narrative, it adds yet another layer of resilience and persistence. It is very likely that many other undisclosed layers exist, and it is certain that each individual participant experiences the different layers to varying extents. Moreover, due to these overlapping positive and negative layers, accessing and moving in the natural spaces unfolds, in this context, as an ambivalent experience. It is an experience of being scared but resilient, worried but relieved, comfortable yet uncomfortable, and of suffocating while breathing fresh air.

5.4 Theme 4: Moving with Symbolic Bodies – Displaying and Claiming ‘Palestinianism’ Despite Attempts of Elimination

The numerous layers of barriers, both mental and physical, that restrict and hinder Palestinians’ free movement need to be understood in relation to the socio-political and spatio-temporal context. Only within this context can we understand the symbolism attached to Palestinian bodies and how their experiences of these barriers are entangled with their experiences of expressing their Palestinian identity in this context. This theme explores the interviewees’ experience of moving with symbolic bodies and how they, both as individuals and as a community, challenge, redefine, and reclaim this symbolism in a context that seeks to eliminate ‘Palestinianism.’

5.4.1 Embodied and Social Experiences of a Suppressed Identity

The previous section introduced some of the restrictions and barriers they face while exercising and moving in the natural spaces in the WB. These restrictions and barriers also carry ‘invisible’ implications that, in addition to physically separating Palestinians, aim to disconnect them mentally, as Jalal emphasises in the following quote: “The, the point is that the, the occupation, the reality that we live under, is designed to keep us isolated from each other, disconnected.” He elaborates that a crucial aspect of RTM is to unite Palestinians and overcome the boundaries imposed by Israel’s various means of separation, which isolate Palestinians in Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israel from each other. Jalal describes the attempt to isolate Palestinians as part of a process of eliminating Palestinian identity, which also affects their exercise practices by directly targeting Palestinian bodies. He recounts an experience where he personally felt this effort to eliminate his identity:

[...] one run that we did once from Sheikh Jarrah to Silwan, it was at a time of... a lot of trouble where residents in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan were being forcibly evicted from their homes through court orders. There was lots of protests and

campaigns at the time, and we thought a run would be an effective way to, to tell people that Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, around 5 kilometres from each other - the struggle is very connected and we want to connect the struggle on the ground [...]. As soon as we arrived to Silwan, we were in Batn al-Hawa neighbourhoods, which is the most threatened neighbourhood in Silwan. And that's when Israeli forces descended upon us to, to spoil the celebration. We were just, you know, having fun, drinking water after the run, getting our medals. And they just basically took off the speakers and started beating up everyone. [...]. In, in a Palestinian sense, like, with the Palestinian identity, they, the, the... The hate that they displayed while they were beating us with their batons and throwing sound grenades. It's very clear this is their response to us running and in Jerusalem, we don't want any kind of display of Palestinianism in Jerusalem.

In this extract, Jalal's experience of moving in these neighbourhoods in a way that clearly displays his Palestinian identity illustrates that such actions can actually be dangerous – especially if they occur during a time when the occupation is intensifying its efforts to eliminate 'Palestinianism' from certain areas. Thus, moving in specific spaces for specific bodies can cause harm to those bodies if they vividly represent something 'Palestinian.' Doing so in a group, which strengthens the presence of Palestinian identity and fosters a sense of solidarity among Palestinians, particularly in neighbourhoods where an ongoing process of eliminating the Palestinian presence is taking place, increases this risk.

Although the context is different in Bethlehem, where Palestinians live somewhat isolated from Israelis and Israeli settlers (at least in their urban living spaces), Palestinians here still experience how their identity is perceived as a threat and may provoke reactions. Hiba, for example, shares this experience of meeting the Israeli army in Cremisan:

Because, you know, having 'Right to Movement' in front of them, especially with 'Palestine,' like this big in front of them, will, will tease them and provoke them. [...]. What happened is the soldiers came in their big van, big truck, whatever. They stopped me. Ironically, I was wearing the Right to Movement T-shirt and they were like, 'Go back, go back. What are you doing here?' [...]. They spoke to me in Hebrew. I didn't understand. I was in shock. I was afraid. I felt threatened because they were with their guns and I with, with my friend and the Holy Spirit. That's it. So, we were walking. They stopped us. They asked us to leave. We left. And that's it. But it's a very demeaning experience because you feel the humiliation, because this is my land. What? Who are you to tell me where to walk and where not to walk?

While Hiba's recurring phrase, "that's it", indicates that the incident happened undramatically, this encounter illustrates a display of power against a symbolic presence that is very telling. Even though Hiba and her friend did not pose a threat to anyone – they were simply walking in nature – their bodies and presence in this area were treated as such by the Israeli army, which both Hiba and Jalal experienced to be a result of the symbolism attached to their identity. Thus, they know that their bodies and the very simple act of moving in certain spaces carry a symbolic meaning; it conveys a message, even when they are not actively or vocally amplifying this message. The message and symbolism they embody is one that the Israeli settler-colonial project is trying to suppress in its attempt to eliminate it.

Elias' experiences exercising in Cremisan or Al-Makhrour reveal that this suppression also materialises latently: "We've been living all the time here. So, they [Israeli settlers] don't see us, they don't recognise us as human beings." His feeling of not being seen and recognised as a human being by Israeli settlers, despite their historical presence in the area, demonstrates how the suppression of Palestinian identity also happens through dehumanisation and ignorance. Furthermore, while Jalal highlighted how Palestinians are isolated from each other in the oPt and Israel, Elias points out that this separation and ignorance extend beyond the borders of historical Palestine: "I mean, like, only if you open Google Maps or you want to, for example, order something online or... If, if your mobile phone like network coverage, it's, it's all the time you feel that 'oh, I'm not part of this world,' you know?" This indicates a sense of being both isolated from and invisible to the world in general, an experience that appears and is reinforced in their everyday lives and mundane activities. During our discussion, Abdel also addressed these topics, highlighting the challenges of receiving mail in Palestine compared to Israel. While these specific concerns are not the primary focus of this thesis, they contribute to understanding the context and significance of the dehumanisation, isolation, and ignorance that Abdel, Elias, and other Palestinians experience, also when they exercise and practice whatever mobility they still have left.

5.4.2 Mobility Restrictions, Exercise and Resistance

Abdel reflects on what the symbolism of exercising while displaying Palestinian identity, amid Israel's efforts to suppress Palestinian identity, means to how this practice of exercising is interpreted and framed by external observers:

If you hike in Finland, it would be just a hike [...]. Now, if you hike in Palestine, it is a political hike. Why? Because there is Israeli occupation. Because we, we don't have the control on the land. So, whatever we do, anything we do, they will perceive

it as a political action, whether it is non-violent direct action [...]. So, when you run, it will become an event. It will become a resistance.

What Abdel emphasises is that the act of exercising is not inherently political or an act of resistance. However, if you exercise publicly in Palestine with a Palestinian identity, it is suddenly perceived as such, whether or not you intend it to be. This is because the Israeli occupation and settler-colonial project do not allow them freedom of movement, illustrating how the socio-political and spatio-temporal context shapes the symbolic values and meaning associated with bodies. Abdel points out that when something seemingly unexceptional, like exercising, suddenly becomes political or an act of resistance, you need to look at the context and ask why this is the case and what is being resisted. In this instance, exercising is politicised and potentially interpreted as resistance because it involves symbolic bodies moving in spaces where they are unwanted by the Israeli settler-colonial project. Abdel also expresses his frustration about not being allowed to go to Jerusalem, even though it is only 5 kilometres from his home. He emphasises that he should be able to go there, but he is not. They should, at least, be able to move freely within the limited territory allocated to Palestinians under the Oslo Agreement – but this is not the reality. From Abdel, we can understand that resistance in Palestine exists only due to conditions that prevent people from living their lives as they *should* be allowed to. They should have the freedom to move, to express their Palestinian identity, and to visit family in Jerusalem, but they do not. The Israeli settler-colonial project, which has imposed a military occupation in the WB as a means of control, denies them these basic freedoms. Under such conditions, Abdel states, “the movement itself, it will become a resistance because to live under the Israeli occupation is not something easy, it interferes in the simplest things on your life.”

Another example from the data illustrating how these restrictions interfere with and dictate how Palestinians move and plan their everyday lives is Sajeda’s experience of moving between Bethlehem and Hebron. Sajeda explains how

[...] sometimes I decide not to go [to Bethlehem] because it's not easy for me to move between Hebron and Bethlehem especially that I have work the second day. [...] I can't guarantee that the second day I can be on time because every day there is a checkpoint at the entrance of Bethlehem which takes a lot of time, even though I can wake up early, but you never guarantee.

Thus, when moving between cities, even within the WB, you must constantly keep in mind that you may need to stop for an unknown amount of time at a checkpoint. Moreover, Sajeda also tells me how “people prefer not to move after like it gets dark,” while Hiba explains that

organising hikes with people from other cities in the WB is difficult because, “you know, the checkpoints, the roads, and soldiers stop you. They make you wait for four or five hours. So, it's not, yani, it's not worth the risk.” Thus, many elements make moving a challenging and unpredictable practice, making people hesitant about going from one place to another. This immobility caused by these challenges affects many areas of their lives, including their access to RTM's community and activities. However, the ‘risk’ of moving is not only time-related. In explaining why people prefer not to move after dark and adding to what Hiba refers to as a ‘risk,’ I draw on Abdel's experiences of moving around the WB in his car:

[...] every time when I go from city to another all the time I'm scared to not, to not do any mistake and miss the way. Because I remember one time, I missed the way and then I found myself in the wrong place. Of course, they searched, the Israeli soldiers, they searched all my car, and they gave me lots of trouble standing there, said, they said ‘so what did, what did you do?’ I said ‘What? I got lost’. He said ‘OK, don't get lost again. If you want to, to be, to stay alive.’

Abdel shares another similar incident of encountering Israeli soldiers while driving with me, during which they pointed an M16 at him. He asks theoretically: “why when I drive my car back to the Right to Movement, I'll be all the time scared to not make a wrong turn, because I will be shot.” In this sense, the risk related to moving from one place to another is not just the potential of having to wait for hours at a permanent checkpoint, getting your car searched, and enduring uncomfortable encounters with Israeli soldiers. It also includes all the unpredictable elements: roadblocks, flying checkpoints, and military presences and displays of power that can make it dangerous to make a wrong turn. These extracts demonstrate how moving by car is also determined by one's identity as a Palestinian, as it defines what spaces you can move in and how far your mobility extends. The psychological stress that you need to endure when waiting 4 hours at a checkpoint, or when a gun is pointed at your head for making a wrong turn, is part of the risk people take when moving between locations. Additionally, there is the experience of humiliation, which Hiba referred to as part of her experience encountering Israeli soldiers in Cremisan (p. 66). Therefore, their mobility, and consequently their ability to access RTM's activities and communities, as well as RTM's ability to arrange hikes and meet with other RTM communities, are influenced by such factors. Thus, mobility restrictions and risk assessment are limiting factors during, before, and after their exercise activities.

5.4.3 Landscapes, Location, and Symbolic (Re)Claims of Palestinian Identity

These stories clearly demonstrate why wearing the ‘Right to Movement Palestine’ shirt (See Appendix IV) is about much more than the RTM community’s right to move in the form of exercise. Although everyone’s right to movement should be a given, the message conveyed is interpreted by the counterpart as political. The fact that their shirts say ‘Palestine’ challenges Israel’s attempts to ignore the existence of a ‘Palestine’ and contradicts the Israeli narrative that justifies their elimination process. Thus, while the act of exercising is simply an everyday practice, its symbolic meaning can only be understood by examining it in context. This context is one in which the militarised settler-colonial project aims at isolating, rendering invisible, and ultimately eliminating Palestinians, not just from Palestine but also from society as a national entity. Raising awareness about this and countering this narrative is fundamental to the basis of existence for the RTM community. However, the interviews also highlight how measures of slow and structural violence are individually experienced and occur on many levels. One level is the deliberate attempt to eliminate Palestinian identity, while another is the restriction of access to, and annexation of, Palestinian land.

Elias points out that the annexation of land is not just a matter of space, but also of access and opportunities to create a healthy living environment that facilitates a healthier lifestyle. He mentions that land prices are high because there is no land to buy, making it extremely expensive and spatially impossible to establish parks or green spaces within Bethlehem. He reflects on how this impacts smoking tendencies: “The absence of public areas and areas where it’s like eco-friendly or, you know, sports friendly – I think, in a way or another, it affected the fact that we are already, like, a smoking community.” While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to prove causality between the lack of green areas and the level of smoking in Palestine, Elias’s insights underscore the complex relationship between the occupation’s effects and the overall health of Palestinians, both mentally and physically. The lack of green, sports-friendly spaces limits access to exercise and recreational activities, leading to fewer opportunities for Palestinians in the oPt to maintain their physical and mental health through physical activity and presence in nature. This is part of the broader, long-term consequences of the settler-colonial project, which negatively impact the overall health of Palestinians in the oPt.

The urban space in Bethlehem is bound to remain urban as long as the borders and walls confine it to its current area. Though landscape changes are taking place in rural areas, they do not benefit Palestinians. On a recent hike with RTM, Hiba tells me how they visited a farmer whose land in Al-Makhroun borders a planned settlement construction:

He talked about how even planting trees... [...] he was saying that such types of plants [pine trees] when you plant them, they grow very quickly and they erase the original view and shape of the, the land [...] So he was saying that he tries to collect all the pine trees and the kind of the leftovers and the leaves, the small ones away from the land because they occupy, they... Even the plants occupy.

If it is not changing through annexation and repurposing for settlement buildings, Palestinian rural landscapes are affected by plants and vegetation that eat the soil's nutrients and undermine the growth of 'Palestinian' trees, such as olive trees. This way, the process of slow violence affects both Palestinian bodies and Palestinian land. Palestinians in the WB are still fighting against this process, such as the farmer who collects the leftovers from the pine trees and the RTM community, who maintain their practices in the natural spaces. Meanwhile, the situation is different elsewhere. This is particularly evident in my interview with Jalal, as he talks about the different places he likes to go running, one of which is an area called Sataf, located in a subdistrict of Jerusalem: "Sataf is a destroyed village in 1948. Israel, what Israel does in many of those villages, they create a natural, national parks. They just convert the whole village into Natural Park." In Sataf, there is no 'Palestinianism' left in the landscape; it has already been eliminated and erased – except for the presence of Palestinian bodies, who go there to reclaim the presence of Palestinians and 'Palestinianism' in this space.

The extracts by Hiba and Jalal presented above highlight the different symbolic meanings of their presence in the WB and within Israeli territory, which are at two different stages in the settler-colonial project. Within the territory of Israel, many Palestinian villages have been destroyed and transformed; they have been 'normalised' and integrated into Israel. In the WB, this has not yet happened to the same extent, and Palestinians are fighting to maintain their presence and claim their rights to the land. However, in Sataf, they are also undermining normalisation and reclaiming Palestinian presence in the area, as Jalal and his friends do when they run with their "Right to Movement Palestine" shirts. In Jerusalem, which represents a third locality, they are navigating a situation where Palestinian neighbourhoods are slowly but surely being emptied of Palestinians through eviction orders. George points out what this means for Palestinian identity in Jerusalem and the role of RTM:

[...] we are going through a project of diminishing our identity in Jerusalem as Palestinians. It's like a big movement that wants to, to lead us to a place similar to what's going on in 1948, where a lot of people no longer identify as Palestinians. They don't understand who they are. It's a lot of individualism. [...]. So, the group [RTM] in Jerusalem offered something else.

Thus, the context in Jerusalem is one where RTM's presence and display of Palestinianism signal a commitment to maintain both a Palestinian presence and identity. This includes Palestinian values that may be undermined by the individualism that, according to George, dominates society in Jerusalem. Moreover, RTM's practices and open display of 'Palestinianism' in Jerusalem are also a symbol of solidarity with those who are being evicted and a way of connecting the individual struggles of Palestinians in different localities. The placenames as well as the map of 'historical' Palestine without the current borders demarcating Gaza and the West Bank as illustrated on the back of RTM's t-shirts, further adds to the symbolism as it displays a 'Palestinianism' that threatens the premise of the settler-colonial project, which is that it can erase Palestinianism from these areas and places. By wearing these t-shirts, whether it is in Jerusalem, Bethlehem or Haifa, they display a strong symbolic message of Palestinian unity and simultaneously reclaim their own interpretation and understanding of 'Palestinianism.'

In this section, I have shared some of the means of elimination encountered by the interviewees in their everyday lives, which, even when taking a starting point in their exercise activities, extend far beyond this. These means include measures of isolation (local and global), limitations on their mobility, suppression of public displays of Palestinianism, annexation of land and natural spaces, and the transformation and erasure of traces of Palestinianism on both former and present Palestinian land. Thus, this process encompasses various means of elimination that manifest as different types of violence, including cultural, structural, and slow environmental violence. These different types of violence extend temporally from past-present-future, and spatially from a local to a global level. As the violence described and highlighted through their exercise practices is entangled with other types of violence, their experiences help illustrate part of this continuum of violence that Palestinians face in their everyday lives. However, Palestinians move their symbolic bodies despite these means and manifestations of violence. They move, for example, by exercising with RTM. The act of exercising is not political, but when they do it, it becomes symbolic of a right that has been breached. In a world where Palestine is not universally recognised as a state and Palestinians are, in practice, denied rights – Including their right to movement and self-determination – a community that calls itself "Right to Movement Palestine" conveys a significant symbolic message.

Thus, their bodies, by being Palestinian and embodying Palestinianism, are by their very existence a threat to the Israeli settler-colonial project. Consequently, they experience their bodies and their identity as targets simply for being Palestinian, but even more so when they visually display and (re)claim a Palestinian identity in spaces where 'Palestinianism' has been

erased or is in the process of being erased. In doing so, they experience their bodies being ignored, physically harmed, dehumanised, and perceived as a threat. They find that their way of moving is politicised and that movement in this context requires planning for the unpredictable, whether this entails being held back for hours at a checkpoint or encountering a roadblock. It is related to risk and feelings of humiliation, anger, fear, and insecurity. Despite this, they continue to move. Sometimes, they do so to display and reclaim their Palestinian identity, using their agency to actively challenge the dominating narrative, and other times, they do so because moving is an inevitable part of life and how we simply continue living.

5.5 Theme 5: “A Window of Hope and Light” – The Capacity of the RTM Community

So, you come here, do something, like, around all these difficulties and negativities that we live under politically and socially, [...] this is offering a different window of hope and light. We're not gonna bring you here and be like, [...] 'we should do this because we're under occupation.' Because at the end of the day, also, apart from your personal, personal way to navigate it, we will, we're not going to offer a significant change to that. We know the limits of what we're doing. It's symbolic.

I open this last section with an extract from my interview with George. This extract is meaningful and telling in terms of explaining the objective behind and the nature of the RTM community. In this extract, George reflects on the purpose of what they are doing. Acknowledging that RTM's exercise activities will not change the situation, He points out that their message is limited to one of symbolic character. However, there is an interesting space between these two purposes: one being to exercise, have fun, and foster hope, while the other is to send a symbolic message. These purposes also represent and bridge exercise as an everyday activity and exercise as something with a deeper social and political purpose. In this section, I firstly address RTM's capacity to bridge the act of exercising and the symbolic, the everyday and the exceptional, in terms of understanding concepts such as resistance, resilience and sumūd in relation to each other. Secondly, I explore the capacities of the RTM community regarding its role in and influence on society, which unfolds from the interviews.

5.5.1 Expressions of Resistance and Sumūd

The context in which the interviewees exercise includes a military occupation and a settler-colonial project that is inescapable and permeates all aspects of their everyday lives. In the extract above, George establishes that RTM's purpose is not to remind people that they are living in a militarised, settler-colonial context. They are never not aware of this. While it is difficult to completely forget, the purpose of RTM is to at least offer people a temporary room

of freedom from this context – a “window of hope and light,” as George puts it. Thus, in an individual and private sense, it provides a valuable space for people to navigate, cope, and mitigate this reality, as demonstrated in sections 5.1 and 5.2. Although George acknowledges that to the ‘outside’ world, the value of RTM is limited to being symbolic, it is important not to understate the social value and significance of a symbolic message. Even though their activities may not be able to change the situation at large, the experiences shared with me in conversations with the participants illustrate the potentiality of change on a smaller scale, while also presenting RTM as a unique space with the capacity to embrace both overlapping and, at times, contrasting feelings and motivations.

RTM is, for instance, a place where people can grow resilience and foster hope while also providing space to share despair. It offers a room to talk about the current situation but also to imagine a better future. Here, some attendees may participate simply to work out, while others might engage for social connections, to convey a symbolic message, by active resistance, or by a combination. It offers activities and a community that can be part of your everyday life and routine. In contrast, others choose a deeper commitment, making it a significant part of their social and/or activist lives. Thus, RTM represents a space where diverse motivations, goals, and emotions intersect and intertwine. This illustrates the complexity of participants’ lived experiences as they exercise and navigate their daily lives within this militarised settler-colonial context.

The appearance of the concept of resistance in relation to exercising illustrates this complexity quite well. Jalal, for example, shares with me how his exercise practices are related to resistance:

When you're hiking in your own land, it's like resistance, like telling the Israeli occupation that no, we are here, and we're committed to be present in our land, and to... Claim it by walking and running through our streets and through our hills and valleys.

Thus, for Jalal, it is a conscious act of resistance even though he is ‘simply’ running. It becomes so because it is a way of emphasising that the land is Palestinian – “our” – signalling a resistance to Israel’s narrative and claim to the land. Yet, it is the context that enables this to become an act of resistance – you cannot resist in a void. In this context, where even mundane activities and merely existing as a Palestinian can be understood through different forms of resistance (either regular, active, or unconscious everyday resistance), it is essential to remember the lived experience of those who are ‘doing’ the resistance. Because even if their actions can be understood as such through a conceptual reading of the activity, my conversation

with Abdel indicated that many nuances are lost by simply applying such terminology without examining the context in which it takes place.

In talking about how everything becomes political and is understood as resistance, Abdel shares how tiring it can be to have everything you do interpreted and ascribed meaning by everyone else. Essentially, he emphasises that Palestinians also have the right *not* to always resist, stating:

You know, sometimes you are tired. You don't need to resist. You don't need to live all your life for resisting I don't know what. You're lucky sometimes as a human being you, you would like to just sit and lay back next to a lake and just to read a book or sleep.

In this sense, Abdel points out that no one should feel their only purpose in life is resistance – everyone deserves not to have to resist all the time, and people should be able to engage in simple, mundane activities without them being, or being interpreted as, acts of resistance. Simultaneously, Abdel points out how resistance may also serve as a vital tool for Palestinians, providing a sense of purpose, motivation, and victory in a context where such feelings can be difficult to attain:

[...] sometimes, the romantic side maybe is the, the side that keep us going on. Because it, it gives different meaning... To your life, to your purpose in life, [...] also it gives you the feeling that you challenged and win, and yet someone does not want you to walk, but you still walk. But as I tell you, as a human being, sometimes you get tired. At some point, you just need to live as a human being.

Here, Abdel is simply stating that Palestinians are humans. However, the fact that Palestinians and their everyday lives under occupation are often viewed through a lens of resistance may, firstly, contribute to a romanticisation of resistance and, secondly, portray Palestinians in a simplistic manner that obscures their humanity. In fact, it was this overemphasis on resistance that initiated our conversation on this topic. Nevertheless, resistance is inevitably part of their lives, as if it is a premise of existence and living as a Palestinian in this context. Even if Palestinians in the oPt are, in practice, to some extent bound to a life of resistance, Abdel insists that they *should not* be; they have a right not to resist and to carry out their everyday lives in all its simple, routinized mundanity, as opposed to an ‘exceptionalization’ of their everyday practices. They have the right to live and be seen as human.

More implicit and latent attitudes and actions of resistance also appear in many places throughout the interview, adding to the complexity of the lived experience of carrying out seemingly normal activities in this context. While some participants explicitly view their

practices as resistance or activism, this always coexists with an interest in being active or taking care of their health. Thus, these purposes coexist and interact with one another in a flexible manner, as motivations are fluid. Regardless of what drives their motivation, a common side effect of the interviewees' involvement with RTM and their activities is that it also gives them a sense of resilience.

In section 5.2, extracts from the interviews illustrate several positive short- and long-term effects of the interviewees' exercise practices with RTM. They highlight how they feel strengthened and empowered in various ways, both physically and mentally. The way in which the interviewees describe their use of exercise in their everyday lives to cope, navigate, and mitigate the context that they live in, illustrates how exercise is a practice of *sumūd*. Although I am weary of applying terms to their practices as an outsider, considering their practices in relation to the definition of *sumūd* presented in section 2.3.2 suggests that even if they do not use such terminology themselves, it can be considered such. This is especially true as it becomes part of their everyday mechanisms that help them maintain and build strength, both mentally and physically, to cope with and counter their living conditions. Furthermore, through their exercise practices, they are obtaining and insisting on a level of 'normalcy,' a normalcy that manifests their presence and lived experiences in this space. By understanding exercise as an activity through which Palestinians assert their presence in a spatial setting that seeks to eliminate them, exercising can be considered part of how Palestinians practice *sumūd*. However, *sumūd* may simultaneously contribute to their ability to keep going, to continue exercising and moving on their land despite the challenges and risks it entails. It thus overlaps with ways in which they build resilience, a resilience that is also strengthened by the positive short and long-term effects they gain from exercising.

Thus, it is possible to contextualise their exercise activities through the concepts of both resistance, *sumūd* and resilience, but as fluid and flexible concepts that influence each other. These concepts may exist in the participants' consciousness to varying degrees and can be co-constitutive, depending on the time and place of the activity. For example, when the interviewees express a commitment to continue displaying their identity and reclaiming their presence in threatened spaces, they simultaneously demonstrate a refusal to silently accept injustice. In this way, their exercising becomes a means of signalling their stance on what is right and wrong, affirming that they stand firm on their rights and will not accept the injustices they experience. It is expressed latently when Hiba, for example, says: "We are going back to Cremisan for sure. We're not abandoning it, no," and more directly by Jalal when he states, "no matter how many... Obstructions they create and how many obstacles they put in our way, we

still want to find ways to stay connected to each other.” These statements indicate that normalisation and ‘giving up’ on this fight for their right to move, to access their own land, and to be Palestinian, is not an option. Without actively labelling their activities as resistance or their mentality as influenced by *sumūd*, they demonstrate a profound sense of both concepts through and as a driving force behind their exercise practices.

5.5.2 “We Run to Tell a Different Story”

Besides being a means of expressing resistance, practising *sumūd* and building resilience, additional significant features and capacities of RTM unfold throughout the interviews. While RTM holds considerable value for individuals, it also has value for the community as a whole in Bethlehem and the WB. However, the individual and collective benefits should, of course, be understood as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. This was one of the main takeaways from my conversation with Hiba. Towards the end of our conversation, Hiba points out the connection between the individual motivation to change one's situation and the importance of a collective in providing both inspiration and purpose. She emphasises that it is not as such RTM that by its existence offers people a place to belong:

[...] people themselves that have to kind of unite themselves and be something. No matter what that something is - It shouldn't be radical, we know that. It's just, it has to be something where you feel that you are free. It's the people that have to change how they look at stuff.

Thus, what she is saying here is that everyone has the agency and capability to change their lives, but the initial motivation to do so must come from within. Importantly, though, she continues by saying that:

[...] people who understand that and see that can help others to also see it and like, spark something in them to do something new. And Right to Movement really helped. And I'm sure it's going to help more people in the future to look at things differently, to see the potential of everybody and what we can do to make our lives better regardless of the situation, regardless of the occupation, regardless of the restrictions, regardless of anything.

Hiba herself experienced how RTM sparked something in her and helped her look at things differently. Her capacity and ability to change her mentality had always existed; she always had the potential to be a leader and play an important role for many other people, but she needed to make the decision herself to unlock this potential.

Importantly, Hiba simultaneously points out that while individual agency is crucial to finding one's own way to feel a sense of freedom and initiate change, you still need a community because "you can't really practise that freedom by yourself. Because maybe that would be selfish. You try your best to give help to everybody because you don't live in this world alone, especially in this situation. You have to [...] be with everybody. You have to help with, help everybody." While you can't help but be inspired by Hiba's words and her caring outlook on life and toward others, it also tells us something important about the individual-collective balance. I interpret Hiba's words as a way of pointing out that everyone has capability, potentiality, and agency, which can only be activated by people themselves. If you activate this, you can find a way in which everyday life in this context becomes more liveable, where you can feel a sense of freedom and belonging. This is essential for everyone, but since "you don't live in this world alone," you cannot achieve this on your own; you need a collective to belong to and contribute to. Thus, finding your freedom individually goes hand in hand with finding a community, and RTM is one such community that may give people inspiration to "look at things differently" and "do something new." This way, the RTM community might help people gain a different and more positive mentality with a positive influence that extends beyond the RTM community.

Another way that RTM might help people look at things differently is by spreading awareness and talking to people, as it challenges and adds nuance to the dominant narrative that people have of Palestinians and life in the oPt. When you join RTM's activities, there is space to speak about the context, share your own experiences, and listen to the experiences of others. For both locals and internationals participating in RTM's activities, this can facilitate a broader understanding of everyday complexities and diversify the perspectives they are typically exposed to. Hiba shares how "many internationals come to Right to Movement, and that for me is the best part because I know people learn about Palestine, know more about us, the people, through Right to Movement, because we want to talk." As I was once one of those internationals, I can confirm when Hiba, with a smile on her face, adds: "[...] and you met us. We're very talkative." However, it is not only internationals who benefit from being part of a community like RTM, where there is a culture of talking openly about one's experiences and perspectives. George's experience is testament to this: "something that's been very consistent throughout my experience with Right to Movement, it's also my knowledge of the complex and the occupation and its impact through the different people I've learned and engaged with." This aspect is valuable because, although the Palestinian participants all understand the context, they are affected by it in different ways and experience it differently.

In this sense, RTM is a place where both locals and internationals can gain new perspectives and learn about society. This aspect is further enhanced through RTM's other activities, such as the hikes they organise. Often, RTM's hikes also have an element of raising awareness, showing people the situation outside of Bethlehem while they get to visit and experience new places. Furthermore, these hikes also serve to connect and show solidarity with other Palestinian communities. In this way, they encourage people to engage with local issues. They also seek to do this internationally, for instance, by helping Palestinian runners participate in marathons or running events outside of Palestine. Although most of these activities are paused at the moment, they are an important part of RTM's work and how they amplify their message both locally and internationally.

Tellingly, their t-shirts have the text "We run to tell a different story" underneath the 'Right to Movement Palestine' logo (See Appendix IV). The activities mentioned above are part of how they utilise running and other forms of exercise to 'tell a different story,' both locally and internationally. By coming together around such activities, RTM creates a space to share these different stories locally. Internationally, RTM tells a different story by having runners present at marathons who represent the message of RTM but also represent Palestine differently. A Palestinian marathon runner tells a different story from the one that people receive from their TV's, in which Palestinians are often either victimised or villainised (see, e.g., Dunsky, 2021; Tamimi & Suárez Vargas, 2024; Pratt et al., 2025; Matar, 2025). A Palestinian marathon runner represents a different story—one about the everyday life of a Palestinian, which includes mundane activities such as running and exercising, and in which Palestinians are humans who pursue and follow their goals and dreams, just like everyone else. The story that RTM tells offers a different perspective. Thus, their message may be symbolic, and the stories they tell may not change their situation, but they certainly challenge the dominant narrative about Palestine and Palestinians, as well as the premise of the settler-colonial project, which is that Palestinians can be silenced and subjected to elimination.

5.5.3 Challenging Boundaries Internally and Externally

Throughout the interviews, RTM emerges as a community that helps to challenge and push against dominant norms within Palestinian society. For example, during my interview with Sajeda, we talked about how it has become more common for women and girls to use scooters and bicycles, and how she has experienced a change through RTM in terms of exercising in public:

[...] *I started joining them, I could feel that people are looking strange and yeah, it's not really acceptable. But when you are within a group, you feel the strength and you can feel that you are changing the idea or the norms how people, like, are used to, like, the, the ideas that they are used to. So yeah, it was, I think, like, part of changing the society.*

Similarly, Elias addresses the normative message of RTM and its activities towards the broader community around Bethlehem and the WB:

It's also sometimes it's, it's a message for the community because now our communities, we don't, people don't exercise... Outside, like outdoor. Yes, some people see it as a taboo and especially for young women. So yeah, in a way or another... You're being... A, a feminist. You're just supporting women. And the idea of they can, they should exercise and should do... Having and living their life freely without any pressure, without any... You know, it's a culture that you spread, I think.

Thus, they experience that they are part of a movement that pushes the norms or 'spreads a culture,' a culture in which exercising in public is normalised for women and men alike. In this way, through their presence and activities within this society, RTM actively participates in changing and challenging the dominant ideas and norms that exist, even if it might only be on a small scale.

On a different level, the one that engages with the settler-colonial context, RTM conveys a message that counters Israel's attempt to isolate and eliminate Palestinians. It does so simply by highlighting in its name and its activities that Palestinians exist and have rights. It also creates a space for its members to claim and display Palestinianism as an identity and Palestine as a spatial entity with a claim to the land it is moving in, as has also been pointed out throughout the analysis. Furthermore, it fosters solidarity and connection among Palestinians in seeking to mitigate the physical boundaries that disconnect them. Jalal also directly points out the importance and significance of this here:

[...] *the Palestinian people are one people. [...]. The occupation wants to isolate each one of us from each other, but we as a running group that transcends borders and walls and checkpoints, we want to maintain this kind of bond through our activities.*

By participating in RTM's activities, participants get to feel an emotional connection despite the physical disconnection, while also sending a symbolic message of unity by emphasising the right to movement of *all* Palestinians. Internally, they defy the boundaries of occupation, while externally, they communicate an important message to the outside world.

What I have tried to illustrate in this section is that RTM is a community that influences people and society, from the local to the international level. It raises awareness, challenges dominating narratives, pushes norms, and counters the aims of the settler-colonial project. In this sense, it has much more to offer than its seemingly simple symbolic message that highlights Palestinians' right to movement. Furthermore, by exploring the individual members' experiences of being part of this community and participating in their activities, the space in between the everyday and the elements that give life purpose and meaning unfolds. It shows how exercising is both a normal, everyday activity that they engage in, as well as a means of expressing resistance, fostering hope, and building mental and physical strength. It is part of how they practice *sumūd* and navigate their everyday lives in a militarised, settler-colonial context. Relatedly, a key takeaway from the experiences shared with me in the interviews is that everyday life in this setting is full of encounters with extraordinary conditions. To clarify, it is as if the distinction between the everyday and the extraordinary blurs in this context, where one must withstand extraordinary challenges and conditions as a regular part of everyday life.

In this setting, RTM is a place and a community that embraces both the everyday and the extraordinary, as well as the in-between. Here, exercising as an everyday practice blends with elements such as hope, resistance, resilience, belonging, and connection. It can express various things, serve multiple purposes, and provide different forms of value to people individually, all at the same time and to different extents. Regardless of how people experience it individually, understanding these individual lived experiences in the broader socio-political and spatio-temporal context reveals RTM's layers of capacity. Firstly, on a theoretical level, RTM and its exercise activities have the capacity to help us understand complex experiences of concepts and how they might intersect. Secondly, in practice, RTM has the capacity to educate locals and internationals, raise awareness, change people's mentality, and counter isolation and elimination. In addition, I believe that RTM has the potential to further change social norms, nuance people's understanding of the everyday lives of Palestinians, and challenge the dominating narrative by showing that a different story exists – and they run to tell this story. We should listen to this story. It is a story of transcending physical barriers, reclaiming Palestinian identity, and fostering connectedness, solidarity, and *sumūd*. It is a narrative of all the things that the military occupation and settler-colonial project can never take away. Finally, it is also a story of the everyday; of how Palestinians live normal lives with regular goals and dreams, amid an extraordinary setting.

5.6 Conclusion of Analysis

To contextualise the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis within the research aim of this thesis, this section concludes the analysis outcome and its five themes in relation to the primary research purpose. This purpose is, *firstly, to explore how the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonialist context can be understood through the practice of exercise, and secondly, how the effects of living in such a context are navigated through the act of exercising with Right to Movement.* According to the division of this research purpose into two objectives and corresponding research questions presented in the introduction, this conclusion will begin by reintroducing and answering the first research question and its sub-questions. Subsequently, the same process will follow for the second research question and its sub-questions.

5.6.1 Primary Research Question 1

How can the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context be understood through the practice of exercise?

- How do the individual experiences show a disruption in the everydayness of the act of exercising?
- In what way does the socio-political and spatio-temporal context influence the participants' experience of exercising?

Introducing how the practice of exercise positions itself between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the interviewees' experiences illustrate that exercising can be considered an everyday activity, as it is integrated into their daily lives and performed regularly, albeit to varying degrees individually. For them, exercising is not an exceptional or unusual activity. Simultaneously, however, exercising represents a space where individuals can remove themselves from their daily lives, serving as a practice incorporated into their everyday lives to give them a break – or a 'vacation,' – from the same everyday life. In this sense, it is something that the interviewees experience as a break from the mundane, an escape from their everyday routines, and a temporary freedom from the reality they live in. These two dimensions are most likely relatable to most other people who exercise as part of their everyday lives. Nevertheless, within this specific socio-political and spatio-temporal context, there exists a third dimension to the act of exercising as an everyday practice.

The third dimension, which is a central part of the interviewees' exercising practices, encompasses elements that more directly disrupt the everydayness of exercising by forcing a confrontation with a militarised, settler-colonial context. People living in 'ordinary' contexts

are not faced with meter-high walls and military checkpoints when they exercise outdoors. In an 'ordinary' setting, one does not encounter the attempt of their elimination as part of their exercising routine. Furthermore, the individual exercise experiences in this context demonstrate that it might involve security risks and feelings of fear, discomfort and loss. This is related to the symbolic bodies in which they move, another element tied to this dimension. What they symbolise with their bodies and the message they convey by exercising, whether intentional or not, is highly politicised due to the settler-colonial project. In this context, the simple act of exercising can be interpreted as a political statement or an act of resistance. This means that exercising can also be perceived as something unusual, something that contradicts the 'normal,' even if this 'normal' is an illusion created by the settler-colonial project to justify itself. Thus, while exercising can be understood as an everyday practice, it is so only to the extent that the everyday unfolds within an extraordinary context that infuses everyday life with extraordinary conditions.

In the context of an extraordinary everyday, the experience of exercise becomes infused with unpredictability, risk, fear, hope, resistance, and resilience. It does so in the encounter with the power superiority of Israel's militarised, settler-colonial project. In this encounter, power is exerted over Palestinian bodies, determining where they can move and when, while ascribing meaning to their bodies and what they symbolise. However, it is also in this encounter that this power is challenged and unmade by Palestinians who, through their exercise practices, take control of their own bodies and what they symbolise. When this encounter is part of their exercise practices, the everydayness of exercising is disrupted on many levels. This disruption manifests, for example, in permanent and temporary physical barriers, such as walls, fences, flying checkpoints, or confrontations with the Israeli military or Israeli settlers. In this sense, even if the act of exercising itself is a routinised, non-exceptional part of their everyday life, the context in which they do so is one that inescapably represents abnormality. This context adds significance to the mental and emotional aspects of their exercise experience as it becomes a matter of principle and identity to exercise despite elements of unpredictability, fear and danger. This contradicts the essence of the everyday and mundane as predictable and not inducing extraordinary feelings. In this sense, the everyday practices and routines in this context are disrupted by extraordinary elements, but to an extent that they become part of the everyday.

To some extent, this already answers the second sub-question related to how the socio-political and spatio-temporal context influences the participants' experience of exercising. As pointed out in the analysis, this context of military occupation and settler-colonialism

influences most, if not every part of their lives, including their exercise practices. It does so by adding this third dimension to the act of exercising as part of their everyday lives. However, this third dimension is also what makes exercising in this context something extraordinary. It transforms exercising and this exercising community into something special and unique because it serves as a way to navigate, mitigate, and unmake what the context imposes on them through control, agency, and social connection. Yet, the context also means that exercising requires resilience, as it is related to unpredictability, danger, and encounters that can be emotionally uncomfortable. These elements make exercising in this socio-political and spatio-temporal context different from exercising in an ‘ordinary’ setting. Although the premise and message of RTM is that it should *not* be this way, that Palestinians have a right to exercise in an ordinary setting, the fact that exercising becomes a means through which one can convey this message can also motivate exercise. As the otherwise simple elements of exercising – moving your body in a given space – are anything but simple in this context, exercising is experienced as more than that. It is also perceived as a way of claiming your presence in this space, as a way of displaying and reclaiming your Palestinian identity, expressing resistance and solidarity, building resilience and fostering hope.

In sum, *the embodied everyday experience of living in a militarised, settler-colonial context can be understood through the practice of exercise* as one that blurs the distinction between the everyday and the extraordinary, adding a dimension of difficulty, politicisation, and symbolic meaning to everyday practices. By exploring the interviewees’ experience of exercising in this context, attention is drawn to the exceptionality of the everyday and how everyday practices become entangled with extraordinary elements. This is experienced through physical and non-physical barriers that restrict their movement and influence their way of moving in this constrained space, as well as their embodied and emotional experience of doing so. Understanding the everyday experience of living in this context through the practice of exercise shows that in representing the embodiment of ‘Palestinianism,’ the movements they make with their bodies are politicised and ascribed meaning externally. Internally, however, the interviewees experience their exercise practices as part of how they counter and challenge the externally assigned meanings and find ways to mediate the exceptional conditions that are part of their everyday lives.

5.6.2 Primary Research Question 2

How are the effects of living in this context navigated through the act of exercising with Right to Movement?

- Which recurring motivations, effects and feelings appear from their stories as central to their lived experience of exercising?
- How do these elements entangle and show how Palestinians ‘encounter’ the militarised, settler-colonial context that they live and exercise in?

Presenting first the main motivations, effects, and feelings that emerge from these stories as central to their experience, we can return to the analysis and trace recurring ideas. For example, we find motivations based on health (physical and mental), feelings of freedom and relaxation, and the experience of a positive transformative effect. Moreover, communal values and the importance of the community are central to everyone’s experience of exercising with RTM. The feeling of belonging and being part of something special, which simultaneously offers a way to communicate a message through something as simple as exercising, is an important aspect of the motivations, effects, and feelings related to their experiences of exercising as part of the RTM community.

At the individual level, exercising is experienced as something that helps to ‘keep you going’ and improve one’s life despite difficult conditions. This effect can result from multiple motivations and feelings arising from their exercise practices. Motivations related to health and the joy and different feelings of ‘freedom’ associated with exercise, recur in the interviews. What the interviewees find freedom from through exercising can vary. It can be from simple everyday conundrums, work-related pressure, worries related to the current situation that are exacerbated by watching the news, or past and recurring traumas. In a general sense, by providing a break from their everyday lives, exercising serves as a way to free themselves from the militarised settler-colonial context in which they live, albeit temporarily. The interviewees’ stories illustrate how exercising has the ability to transform their state of mind and take them somewhere else. However, while it is a practice of freedom, it is also influenced by and reflects a lack of freedom. Thus, in some cases, exercising becomes an active expression of resistance, displaying a disapproval towards the settler-colonial project and an unwillingness to accept normalisation.

In this way, using exercise in different temporal and spatial settings can serve various purposes and express different things for the interviewees, depending on the type of exercise and where and when it is carried out. Occasionally, they may want to exercise in a given space simply for the sake of exercising, motivated by the health benefits and the general joy of moving their bodies in great company. At other times, in a time or place of confrontation (which is not always predictable), such as in Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem or in Cremisan outside of Bethlehem, it may become more of an active and conscious symbolic act. However, even when

they are exercising out of sight of any external spectators, the meaning of RTM's activities can never be reduced to just exercising.

The motivations, effects, and feelings related to exercising are not singular and simple in this context. This is an important aspect to understand in order to answer the second sub-question about how these elements entangle and demonstrate how Palestinians 'encounter' the militarised, settler-colonial context in which they live and exercise. By wearing shirts that convey a very clear message, the existence of this community is based on values. It is founded upon the notion that Palestinians have rights like everyone else, rights that they are denied. Furthermore, in a context that seeks to eliminate Palestinian bodies, one can argue that the simple act of caring for one's mental and physical health is both an act of resistance and a means of fostering resilience. This was the argument of Audrey Lorde (1988), whose famous words can be applied to this context as well: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 130). Although we should question and criticise the causes of the politicisation of seemingly everyday practices, it can nevertheless be powerful to understand self-preservation in such a setting as an act of "political warfare" or resistance. Based on the analysis, I find that doing so in this case points to an incredible sense of resilience and capacity for change, which exercising activates and fosters both individually and within the community. When exercising with this community, participants may experience a sense of hope, belonging, connectedness, solidarity, empowerment, and freedom. All of these elements intertwine and emerge as agency, control, and strengthened resilience, contributing to more than a livable life despite the settler-colonial project's attempt to make it as unlivable as possible.

In conclusion, based on these answers to the sub-questions, it is possible to answer the second primary research question: *how are the effects of living in this context navigated through the act of exercising with Right to Movement?* The analysis finds that the effects are navigated through exercise as it helps make the militarised, settler-colonial context one that is more than just 'liveable.' Beyond a means of navigating, exercising also serves as a way to resist, control, and unmake the relationship of power and control that the settler-colonial regime seeks to impose on them. It does so by providing a creative way of expression, in which they insist on their rights, their presence, their identity, and their connection as Palestinians. They use exercise to refuse to be ignored, dehumanised, and have their identities eliminated. They refuse to have their lives reduced to the merely livable; instead, they have fun, find freedom, and take care of themselves and each other, all through the act of exercising. They use exercise to transform anger into agency, despair into hope, feelings of isolation into feelings of unity, and

powerlessness into empowerment. In conclusion, they not only navigate but also transform the effects of the militarised, settler-colonial context in which they live through exercising.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, I address the secondary research purpose by drawing on decolonial feminism in exploring *what happens when you expose the oppressive structures and systems of the 'Western world,' which transcend to dominate international structures and systems, to the lived experiences presented in this research.* In what follows, I discuss how such structures and systems manifest today in the context of Palestine and why paying attention to lived experiences is important not only to understand the embodied nature of violence but also in policymaking. Lastly, I argue that exposing oppressive structures and systems to such experiences can be transformative if only 'we' (especially those of us who are citizens or residents in 'Western' societies) dare to confront the unsettling reality that we hold a responsibility for a culture of violence and agency to promote a culture of peace.

Before directing attention to this, an understanding needs to be established of what exactly constitutes such oppressive structures and systems of the West, which transcends to dominate international structures and systems. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the world order is shaped not only by patriarchal structures but is also deeply entrenched with and interconnectedly shaped by imperialism, capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy (MacKenzie & Wegener, 2021). Related to such forces, feminist scholars engaged with decolonial approaches and postcoloniality have pointed out how colonial logics persist today "in the continuing political, epistemic, socio-cultural, and economic domination of historically colonised peoples" (Motlafi, 2021, p. 179). Thus, Western coloniality continues today, and its entrenchment in global systems and structures enables Western domination over historically colonised people to continue. Coloniality, imperialism, capitalism, militarism, and white supremacism are all elements that sustain and enable oppressive structures and systems. These systems are based on gendered, racialised/ethnic hierarchies of subjugation to white and Western forms of power (Motlafi, 2021). Such hierarchies and colonial logics of domination manifest both in national and international spheres of policymaking and create global asymmetrical power relations (Azarmandi, 2018; Bouka, 2021). These dynamics and elements shape the oppressive systems and structures of the West.

6.1 The Illusion of an Isolated 'West' and Diverted Responsibility

It is with caution that I apply the terminology of the 'West' throughout this text; hence, this initial use of quotation marks to indicate a critical stance towards the notion and its use. I take this stance because the constructed notion of the West is both politically, socially, and culturally loaded and not merely a definition referring to a geographical area. Moreover, the West

certainly does not exist in isolation from the rest. Using terminology such as East vs. West or Global South vs. Global North risks creating an illusion of two physically separate world societies. Although these may be helpful as categorisations or notions to capture the socially constructed values attached to them, we need to be aware of what such terminology implies. This awareness might especially be needed in the West, as the wielded control and domination mainly come from this direction. It is arguably easier to forget this when one is not on the receiving end, experiencing the historical influence and current impact that Western policies and ways of thinking leave outside of the West.

Post and decolonial approaches remind us that Western imperial and colonial powers have historically played a decisive role in creating the current instability and asymmetrical conflict in Palestine. One factor driving Jewish migration to Palestine was antisemitism in Europe. Furthermore, British colonialism and its administrative policies in Palestine pre-Israel marked the beginning of Palestinians' colonial oppression and the endorsement of a Jewish state in Palestine (See e.g., Section 3.1; Khalidi, 2017; Khalidi & Seikaly, 2023). Later on, primarily, but not exclusively, the US's support for Israel has allowed the settler-colonial project of elimination to continue, and with increased pace since October 7th, 2023 (Agha et al., 2024; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, August 28, 2024).

The colonial and imperial logic and legacy of Western states allow these conditions to continue. This manifests, for example, through political endorsement and support, but also through weapons trade and large amounts of 'military aid' from the US to Israel (Khalidi & Seikaly, 2023). Beyond the US, European states such as Denmark directly and indirectly export weapons and weapon components to Israel, despite evidence that such components have been used to commit war crimes in Gaza (Amnesty International, February 21, 2025; El-Shewy et al., 2025). Furthermore, a PAX report documents how European companies and financial institutions support the continued arms supply to Israel, thus facilitating war crimes and violations of human rights law (PAX, 2024). Thus, Western states are linked to the conflict historically and presently through their foreign policies, both in the national and international spheres. Western and all other states are responsible for the impact and influence of their policies on other states and other people's lives.

In addition to these direct lines of influence and impact, there is an important philosophical relationship, not just between the 'West' and its past colonies, but between all societies and individuals that should be granted importance. This unfolds when drawing on feminist ethics of care and its relation to justice, as they have drawn attention to "the fact that humans are embedded in relationships in which reciprocal care, mutual trust, and cooperation

are as crucial to private and public life as they are to government policy and global politics” (Pettersen, 2021, p. 36). Thus, human relationships transcend national borders and local contexts, and both national and global politics should show care towards all, not just some groups of people. To encourage such an approach to national and global policymaking, we need to understand our interconnectedness and how policies decided in one place impact people elsewhere. We need to see the recipients of our policies as equals – humans who have care needs just like ourselves. The lived, human experience must be central in our understanding of war, violence, and peace, as well as in our approach to policies related to violent and conflictual contexts. When we instead, as is currently the case, centre national interests, economic growth, and military power, I argue that we reproduce the same oppressive systems and structures that create the conditions for more violence. By understanding wars, conflict, and violence in distant, disembodied, and non-human related terms, we form understandings (and thus make policies) that do not account for the fact that wars and conflict are embodied phenomena experienced and felt by humans. They are carried out by humans (including decision-makers in the West) towards other humans (Sylvester, 2013). To fully grasp the nature of war, violence, and conflict as corporeal phenomena and our embeddedness in them, we need to understand the experiences of those who live in them (Parashar, 2021; MacKenzie & Wegener, 2021; Féron & Väyrynen, 2024).

6.2 Nuancing Violence/War and Centring Embodied, Lived and Everyday Experiences

The way we receive information about conflicts in mainstream media often centres on the exceptional, such as significant events, progress on the battlefield, or political developments (Dunsky, 2021). Meanwhile, in politics, wars and conflicts are typically treated and discussed as ‘political operations,’ and the terminology used centres military strategy, power balance, coercion, and material loss/gain (MacKenzie & Wegener, 2021; Bouka, 2021). Within this discourse, only the soldiers’ experience is valued as knowledge of war (MacKenzie & Wegener, 2021), while the perspectives of state leaders and main characters in exceptional stories are prioritised over those of ordinary civilians (Féron & Väyrynen, 2024). These framings leave little room for understanding war and its concomitant violences as corporeally experienced phenomena that people live with and experience in their everyday lives in complex ways. Consequently, decisions with direct influence on the ground are made by individuals in positions of power and influence who are often physically distant and have a disembodied experience of war and violent conflicts. To fully understand and analyse the impact of political decisions and to make better ones in the future, we need to focus on the perspectives of those

who experience war and violent conflict, as well as those directly affected by the related policies (Bouka, 2021).

Individual experiences and stories help us understand war and violent conflict as something that is experienced and felt both physically and emotionally (Sylvester, 2013; Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2021). The experiences shared in this research, for example, illustrate how different types of violence can manifest as various and interconnected forms of pain in the body. Emotional distress caused by indirect types of violence can lead to physical pain; yet, both physical and emotional pain can be alleviated or temporarily relieved through exercise. Furthermore, it is possible to gain a deep contextual understanding of the complex dynamics of power and control, which are shaped by spatial and temporal factors. The stories shared by the interview participants help us understand, for instance, how it feels to have mobility restricted, to move and exercise in an unpredictable and contested space, to have limited access to green natural areas, and how it feels to experience one's body and identity as a target of elimination. Their experiences reveal how a continuum of violence is felt in and on their bodies in their everyday lives – in sensory terms such as suffocation, tension, and pain, and emotionally through feelings like anger, stress, frustration, despair, and fear. Most importantly, they testify to a human perspective that shows how they cope, mitigate, and transform such experiences as they continue their lives despite the conditions. They continue their everyday lives, which include normal activities such as exercising, working, reading, socialising, caring for their families and communities, setting new goals, and imagining the future.

In demonstrating how all these elements are experienced in their everyday activities, we may better understand the scope and influence of the continuum of violence that Palestinians experience, as their lived experiences show how it impacts their everyday lives down to the smallest details. For instance, the RTM community knows that this continuum spans from the local to the global, so they recognise the importance of telling their story internationally and fostering solidarity beyond Palestine. As they speak of the changes they observe in the landscape and how they become increasingly restricted over time, they visualise the experience of settler-colonialism as an ongoing process. They also point out how it is a ubiquitous condition that spreads through time and space at varying paces, depending on the political climate and tension levels. In this sense, they provide nuance to violence, portraying it as more than a singular event or isolated instances. This is illustrated well by Abdel, who tells me how “people are giving training about post-traumatic [stress] disorder. But we are not post – we live *in* the trauma” (emphasis added). Thus, war, conflict, and in this case, settler-colonial violence, are embodied experiences they endure continuously in their everyday lives.

These experiences represent a human-centred perspective in presenting a narrative that those of us who have not experienced the context directly in our bodies can relate to more than we can to disembodied notions of war strategies, casualty numbers, and political analyses. We can relate to everyday practices as well as physical and emotional sensations. Although all embodied experiences are individual, we may better understand the meaning of war and violence when they are conveyed through elements that we all know and engage with in our everyday lives. Lived experiences help us humanise the notion of war as something with real human consequences, experienced by and targeting sentient bodies – not as a disembodied phenomenon. Additionally, by centring such experiences, we may better understand how humans navigate these settings and continue their everyday lives despite existing in difficult and dangerous circumstances. In doing so, we begin to see individuals living in violent and conflicted settings not merely as victims, but as people with capacities for agency, creativity, change, innovation, and joy amid such circumstances.

6.3 Exposing and Challenging Systems and Structures of the West

Thus, these experiences can be said to represent accounts of how the unequal global power relationship plays out and is felt directly on Palestinian bodies, in the sense that Israel's settler-colonial project is a direct outcome and continuation of the colonial logic of the West, supported and sustained by the West. Although Western powers gave up their previous colonies and universally agreed on dismantling such practices under the pretext of principles of "Equal rights and self-determination," as the UN charter clearly states (UN, 1945; UN, n.d.), they still support and sustain Israel's settler-colonial practices. This case constitutes a vivid example of present-day in-progress settler-colonialism and how such practices are sustained by a dominating logic of coloniality manifested in the policies of Western states, through endorsing both implicitly (e.g. through ignorance or unwillingness to condemn and sanction) and explicitly (on the pretext that Israel has the right to defend itself) Israel's settler-colonial project and war crimes (see, for example, Pratt et al. 2025; Tamimi & Suárez Vargas, 2024; El-Shewy et al., 2025). But more than representing an account of present-day settler-colonialism and exposing the West's neocolonial practices, Palestinians' stories and experiences also demonstrate an unmaking, a mitigation, and a resistance to this relation of power.

Their stories represent a different narrative that we are not usually exposed to. While positive exceptions exist, mainstream Western media tend to primarily frame Palestinians in stereotypical frames, either as victims (albeit at the bottom of the 'victim hierarchy') or as perpetrators of violence (Dunsky, 2021; Tamimi & Suárez Vargas, 2024; Pratt et al., 2025;

Matar, 2025). While such stereotyping is harmful and dehumanising in general, presenting Palestinians as always fighting ‘against’ and as being in opposition to Israel (either as aggressors or heroic defenders) wrongly suggests that they are two equal parties to the conflict. This also reduces the conflict to one solely between Israel and Palestine, obscuring the historical context and foreign interference. The conflict extends in both scope and content as it concerns a bigger question of global power relations and social justice. However, these critical aspects are often overlooked when the conflict is depicted merely as a struggle between two equally positioned parties attempting to ‘solve’ a dispute within a rights and law-based world order, supported by unbiased, fair systems and structures that grant both parties an equal voice (Dunsky, 2021; Tamimi & Suárez Vargas, 2024; Pratt et al. 2025; Matar, 2025).

The depiction of Palestinians solely as victims is equally misleading and harmful, as it portrays them as individuals without agency and human capacity (Dunsky, 2021; Matar, 2025). While such narratives contribute to a general dehumanisation, these either-or representations also reveal a gendered colonial logic of depicting primarily Palestinian women as victims of violence (in need of ‘saving’) and Palestinian men as perpetrators of violence (a ‘danger’). These portrayals can then be utilised to justify imperialistic and colonial projects, all the while concealing this colonial mentality and its penetration into the systems and structures that enable continued violence and oppression (Pratt et al. 2025).

The experiences shared by Palestinians as part of this research and elsewhere counter the simplistic and stereotypical narratives to which we are most often exposed. They represent everyday stories in which women are not victims but initiators and agents of change, and in which men are not violent but caring—in roles of community leaders, promoting solidarity and peaceful initiatives. By posing these counter-narratives, I do not wish to simply reproduce another simplified and gendered narrative. Rather, I aim to highlight how their individual experiences and stories disprove the dominant narrative and provide nuance to the portrayal of Palestinians and what it means to live in a militarised, settler-colonial context. They expose our faulty, biased narratives and our incapacity to see beyond simplified victim/villain categorisations due to our colonial mentality. Through simplified narratives, we fail to understand how this is a broader issue of social and global justice that we need to mobilise against—that this is also a conflict of the West, and that we are related to it and responsible for it in direct and indirect ways.

Furthermore, through these depictions, we also fail to recognise the incredible capacity, potential, and agency that Palestinians demonstrate every day. For example, the experiences of Palestinians exercising as part of the RTM community illustrate how they use exercise as a

creative and flexible means to unmake and undo the power relations imposed on them from the outside. They utilise exercise to transform physical and emotional sensations, while the collective aspect of exercising together serves as a means to express resistance, solidarity, and unity, all the while tackling difficult emotions, traumas, and political discussions together. Moreover, their exercise practices challenge the neoliberal approach to exercise and sports that dominates in the West, characterised by individualism, competitiveness, and capitalism (see, for example, Harjunen, 2017; Azzarito, 2019; Gazeres, 2023), as they demonstrate the transformative potential of such communities in fostering strong, inclusive communities, that view exercise activities as a fun and social practice focusing not just on individual optimization but on collective strength and solidarity. This community, as I see it, has created an exercise space that enhances not only the mental and physical health of its individual participants but also the health and social strength of the community as a whole by promoting support, solidarity, and a sense of unity and belonging. Furthermore, they are showcasing the transformative and symbolic potential of exercise as a practice capable of promoting values of justice, peace, and solidarity.

Thus, individual stories and experiences might give us much to reflect on and show us a different way of doing and being. Moreover, such stories expose the colonial logic and narrative that depict Palestinian (and Arab) society as ‘uncivilized,’ powerless, and lacking agency and thus need to be ‘saved’ by western ‘democracies’ – or alternatively portraying Israel as a ‘victim’ threatened by its dangerous, aggressive, and ‘backward’ Arab neighbours (Elia, 2017; Pratt et al. 2025). Regardless, exposing the gendered and colonial narratives of Palestinians to the reality of the everyday lives of Palestinians shows how such narratives are deeply destructive and harmful. Furthermore, such simplified depictions fail to acknowledge the potential for peaceful transformation. The RTM community exemplifies how Palestinians create initiatives with significant potential and capacity for transformation and dialogue. As a community, they hold profound knowledge and understanding of the diversity of opinions and perspectives among Palestinians, making them far better than any outside actor at navigating difficult political conversations. I argue that Palestinian individuals engaged in such communities should play central roles in any initiative aimed at envisioning a just, peaceful transformation of the asymmetrical conflict and a different future for Palestine.

6.4 Taking Responsibility and Creating Just Foreign and International Policy

It should be no surprise to those of us living in non-violent environments, yet whose governments influence violent conflicts, that violence affects sentient human bodies. However,

many Western countries' foreign policies seem to disregard this, failing to reflect the equal value and rights of all humans. This is evident in the case of Palestine through their weapons trade policies, military aid, and reluctance to address Israel's violations of international law, including illegal settlements and a disproportionate response to Hamas' terror attack, resulting in a genocidal war on Gaza. Decolonial feminists have explained such foreign policy measures of Western states, for example, by revealing how a persisting colonial logic, which attributes different values to different racialised bodies, determines whose bodies they are willing to 'sacrifice' and whom they will protect (Bouka, 2021). Thus, universally agreed-upon principles, rules, and norms are applied and upheld selectively, based on national interests and agendas. Such interests and agendas are driven by, for example, capitalism and imperialism, which stand in the way of a human-centred understanding and approach to war and conflict.

I argue that a gendered, colonial logic is deeply entrenched in the systems and structures that sustain oppression and a global culture of violence. The Western world carries a significant responsibility for this, but it is often overlooked due to the physical and mental distance from a given Western capital to a conflict-ridden 'third world' country. However, we are all part of creating, reproducing, and reshaping the notion of coloniality. If we truly want a more peaceful and just future, we must challenge and change the oppressive systems and structures that dominate much of national and global politics, because – if anything – the current state of the world should serve as proof that these systems do not work to create a more peaceful and just world for anyone but a select few, at the expense of the rest.

Researchers and thinkers engaged with feminist ideas and principles have already initiated this mission and presented ideas and ways to challenge and change current structures and systems. Pettersen (2021), for example, suggests appealing to the ethics of care, as care is something we can all relate to. We all need some level of care, and we all care for someone. In her reconceptualisation of the notion of care, she argues for a need to expand our understanding of responsibility for care. Pettersen argues that “[f]ostering and practicing care may prevent or reduce harm and conflicts” and that “appealing to care might change a decision-maker’s narrow, selfcentred perspective, and prioritising care in order to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are met contributes to peace and stability” (p. 28). However, this requires that “care is considered a universal value, not a local practice, subjective emotion, or feminine inclination” (Pettersen, 2021, p. 34). According to this idea, care is a value that can promote human understanding and connectedness since the need for care is universal. An acknowledgement of this could shift our approach to local as well as global politics to one where the human need for care is central to our understanding of peace and security.

Similarly, Hudson (2021) advocates for feminist principles of solidarity and community to foster collective responsibility for war and peace. Hudson highlights that collective security also requires taking collective responsibility, endorsing an understanding of security in which “[i]nterdependence, mutual enablement and empathy are given preference over masculine-associated autonomy, self-help, individualism and competition” (p. 31). In challenging the conventional Western approach to security, she draws on African feminisms and Ubuntu, an African philosophy that refers to values such as hospitality, care, compassion, and generosity (Hudson, 2021). Just as Hudson draws on Ubuntu and African knowledge in imagining peace and solutions to war, I argue that critical feminism could benefit from engaging with knowledge from Palestinian values and communities, such as RTM, in rethinking approaches to and imaginations of peace(s). The RTM community has succeeded in fostering a culture of peace amid a continuum of violence. In their exercise activities, they create and promote a purpose greater than themselves, fostering agency and community while promoting justice and solidarity. While it is up to future feminist peace research to figure out how we, in a broader sense, can engage with the knowledge of such communities, a day will come when these communities could become central to imagining a peaceful future for Palestine. However, it is most likely that this day will only arrive once we dismantle the existing oppressive power structures and hierarchies that prolong and sustain Israel’s settler colonial project.

I argue that a just, sustainable peace is simply not achievable within the existing systems and structures, as the current situation in Palestine clearly illustrates. In an introductory article to a special issue of *the Journal on Intervention and Statebuilding* on decolonial and feminist perspectives, Lazic and Stavrevska (2024) note how the case of Palestine has demonstrated “the limits and cruelty of the state-based liberal international order and the notion of peace as being in harmony with this order” (p. 376). They highlight that peace, within the limits of the current liberal peace paradigm, can never lead to a holistic positive peace because the structures it embraces are inherently harmful. Thus, they call for a decolonial and feminist approach to create alternative paradigms that do not reproduce such systems of violence.

Likewise, Bouka (2021) draws attention to the dominant understanding of war as a cost-effective practice that places the values of white bodies over those of brown and black bodies when evaluating military interventions. Despite Bouka’s arguments being based on military intervention and ‘Responsibility 2 Protect’ cases, I find that the same insights apply to broader cases of foreign policy decisions related to wars and conflicts afar, particularly regarding which war efforts influential and powerful Western states choose to condemn, endorse, or support. In applying a decolonial feminist lens, Bouka points out that those in power to make decisions

about the lives of ‘people’ in a global sense are situated in Western capitals, dictating how wars and conflicts unfold in places far from them, which constitutes “the ultimate expression of sovereignty” (p. 127). Bouka argues that in order to change foreign policy goals, we need to centre the experiences of those who “disproportionately suffer from the immediate and long-term consequences of oppression, war and interventions” (p. 134) and work on dismantling oppressive structures domestically, as these also manifest in a state’s foreign policy (Bouka, 2021). I interpret this as yet another argument for the West’s co-responsibility and as an encouragement for self-reflection within Western societies to initiate change.

The need for Western societies to look inwards is amplified by feminist voices that call for solidarity and responsibility in the quest for a decolonised and more just, peaceful world. Such calls are far from novel, and among them is Mohanty (2003), who in the book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* writes that feminist solidarity “constitutes the most principled way to cross borders— to decolonize knowledge and practice anticapitalist critique” (p. 7). Yet, despite an ethics of care being at the centre of feminist thinking, scholars have pointed out the silence among (primarily Western) feminists regarding the genocide in Gaza and the increasing violence in the WB (Kynsilehto, 2024; Pratt et al., 2025). Thus, even within feminist circles, there is still much work to be done in terms of decolonising the practice and thinking of feminist principles and ideas.

This topic is also addressed in a collaborative work of Palestinian feminists in which they call for feminists to not only be sympathetic but also to show solidarity. In the article, Ajour (2025) states that “[r]eal solidarity requires actively opposing systems that enable violence against Palestinians. It must question political agendas, resist colonial narratives, and prioritize justice over geopolitical interest” (Pratt et al. 2025, p. 232). A decolonial, feminist agenda thus requires us to take responsibility as humans in a relational world and to foster a culture of peace in our everyday and professional lives. This may necessitate difficult self-reflexive work regarding our own embodied reality in the social and political space we inhabit, in order to realise how this reality contributes to oppressive structures and systems. However, I believe that this challenging practice will also lead to a discovery of agency and potentiality, revealing ways in which each of us can contribute to change. Consequently, a feminist decolonial agenda also cultivates power, both individually and collectively, and such power is invaluable in a time when we can all, at times, feel powerless.

I find it very suitable here to re-quote Hiba in an endorsement of her message that “You try your best to give help to everybody because you don't live in this world alone, especially in this situation. [...] you have to be with everybody.” What I see in Hiba and the rest of the RTM

community is individuals who take responsibility and show solidarity in a situation where such characteristics and practices are especially needed. However, individuals and communities who take responsibility and foster solidarity are especially needed *there* because someone else is not doing their part *elsewhere*, not carrying their weight of responsibility, and not actively showing solidarity. A feminist decolonial agenda encourages us to start doing so and points out that we all need to contribute to fostering a more peaceful and socially just world. Furthermore, I argue that those of us who live in, sustain, and hold a privileged position in the societies that have promoted and maintain oppressive structures and systems have an extra contribution to make.

7. Conclusion

This study has aimed to make previously unknown experiences of exercising in a militarised settler-colonial context known. Through the lived experiences of six participants from the RTM community in Bethlehem, this thesis highlights how exercising, as an everyday practice, gains value beyond such when carried out in an extraordinary setting. By examining their experiences, we can understand exercising as a practice situated between the everyday and the extraordinary, showcasing its flexibility and how its significance and symbolic value vary according to the socio-political and specific spatio-temporal settings in which it is practised. This flexibility extends to its role as a form of resistance and a means of building resilience. Exercising, as described by the participants, can serve as both an intentional and unintentional expression of resistance. They do not always exercise to actively express resistance; at times, it is merely a routinised practice that provides them with physical and mental well-being, offering long-term benefits that help make them more resilient. Their motivations and the effects of exercising within this community are individual and varied. However, in a settler-colonial context that seeks to eliminate Palestinian bodies, taking care of one's physical and mental health through exercise can itself be regarded as an act of resistance.

They insist on preserving their Palestinian bodies and their Palestinian identity by exercising and (re)claiming their presence on their land. In this way, they use exercise as a creative means of expression. As much as it serves as a form of expression, it also acts as a means of transformation. Despite the inescapable condition of the occupation, exercising helps them attain a state of freedom. Through their exercise practices, they transform their state of mind, changing feelings of worry, anger, and despair into joy, relaxation, and empowerment. Exercising positively impacts their minds and bodies in both the short and long term. This demonstrates the powerful role of exercise as a means of taking control of one's body and exercising agency regarding how they encounter the militarised, settler-colonial context in which they live. Furthermore, the RTM community utilises exercise to take control of and change the narrative, to tell a story that is missing. It is a story that demonstrates the unity of Palestinians despite the separation caused by the settler-colonial project. It is a story of solidarity, persistence, and of Palestinians as people who simply want and have the right to freedom of movement like everyone else.

In the discussion, I engaged with decolonial feminist ideas to argue why such experiences matter and propose ways to challenge and transform the existing Western-dominated systems and structures that sustain violence and suppression. Stories, such as those

shared in this thesis, help us realise that war and violent conflicts are corporeal experiences that people live through in their everyday lives. Without such stories, we cannot understand these phenomena or how to end them. However, a fundamental change in how we understand, analyse, and talk about war and violence – centring on lived everyday experiences – requires not just a change of approach but a shift in paradigm. It necessitates a radical change in how we understand our interconnectedness and responsibility toward one another. The decolonial feminist ideas I present and draw upon in the discussion are at once abstract and concrete. For instance, a feminist ethic of care is abstract because it represents the worldview of an ideal world, a utopia that seems unattainable from our current perspective. Yet, what they suggest can be translated into concrete actions and practices that everyone can adopt.

First of all, we can begin to question our own position in the world and challenge our ontological assumptions of responsibility and community. Through reflexivity and exposure to alternative ideas, as well as examples of fostering solidarity and community—such as the RTM community—we can change how we perceive and practice such values ourselves. We can act on these values by, for example, showing solidarity, speaking out against injustices, demanding that our governments take responsibility, and producing and disseminating knowledge on decolonial agendas. These are just some of the many ways in which we, both as individuals and as collectives, can contribute to and act towards a culture of radical, decolonial peace. Beyond its normative and practical aims, it is my hope that this thesis serves as a valuable contribution, not just to what can be categorised as feminist peace research, but to peace research in general. I believe that the approach used and the focus on lived experiences applied in this thesis is of value and importance to the field, and this study adds to existing literature addressing and utilising such means.

There is still much to explore and gaps left to fill regarding the topics addressed in this thesis. For example, several aspects and points of criticism could have been included and addressed in the discussion. I could, for instance, have addressed the failure of the ‘Liberal Peace’ paradigm or explored the West’s practices of neocolonialism as it manifests in Palestine alongside Israel’s settler-colonialism. Limiting it was difficult as it left a feeling of insufficiency – insufficiency in terms of adequately addressing the structures and systems that sustain a culture of violence, but also insufficiency in terms of getting the transformative and normative message of this thesis through. However, despite its limitations, I found it essential to include a discussion that critically engages with these destructive elements for normative and ethical reasons. It would be way too easy to conduct research that only describes the surface without diving into the deep and facing the discomfort of being far underwater. It would not

make sense to proclaim a feminist agenda without fully embracing the feminist aim of fostering an approach to peace that is inseparable from justice, hence the need to address injustice. However, as someone who only came to a recent discovery of how my values and beliefs are associated and related to those of feminism, it is important for me to point out that I take this stance not only due to my methodological approach. Rather, it is also my personal belief that it would be both immoral and unethical not to address the obvious injustices that Palestinians experience, injustices enabled by a settler-colonial project that is supported and sustained by governments like my own.

Before starting this research, George pointed out the limitations of focusing only on the Bethlehem community. In our conversation, he elaborated on the different characteristics and challenges faced by the various RTM communities across their localities. Each community conducts its exercise practices in a distinct socio-political and geographical setting, as well as at different temporal stages of the settler-colonial project. The analysis briefly touched upon how these different contexts give their exercise practices different symbolic meanings and significance, as demonstrated by the comparison between Jalal and Hiba's experiences in Section 5.4.3. Thus, the stories shared in this study represent only a small fraction of how exercising in this specific location is experienced, not how it is experienced to exercise in a settler-colonial context in general. While experiences are always individual, it would have been valuable to carry out a broader study on how the RTM community practices exercise in these different localities. Doing so might tell us something about how it is used and ascribed different meanings at different localities and reveal how it reflects the settler-colonial reality at a given location. This could serve as a way of 'mapping' settler-colonial realities, how they are experienced, and how exercise is practised and utilised in different localities and realities. Acknowledging the potential for a broader study including more, if not all, RTM communities, this study opens up new future research objectives.

Furthermore, I believe that this study might suggest additional potential research topics and inspire new perspectives. On a theoretical level, we can use lived experiences to gain a deeper understanding of how concepts such as resistance and resilience are experienced, both consciously and unconsciously, by those who are considered to 'do' such practices. What stood out to me in their experiences is the complexity of the emotions and motivations that, in a flexible manner, overlap and coexist even when they are contradictory. Unpacking these relations and complex experiences of, for example, resistance, could be an interesting way to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the concept. Doing so might help reveal how resistance can be a fluid and flexible practice, as it moves on a scale of consciousness and

intentionality. Furthermore, it might also be influenced by external interpretations and romanticised ideas of resistance. In this sense, further elaboration might bring to light that some acts of resistance move between existing categorisations of resistance and potentially represent a different, fluid form of resistance. As addressed in Section 2.1, exercise, in its informal forms, has not received much attention, neither as resistance, everyday resistance, nor as an act of embodied resistance. Further research on exercise as an embodied everyday practice might help fill this gap.

Likewise, I find that the concepts and ideas that have appeared recurrently throughout the research process, such as community, inclusivity, belonging, collective empowerment, and solidarity, provide an interesting entry point for understanding the individual-collective relations fostered by the RTM community. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that RTM, as a Palestinian community, is shaped by social and cultural norms and values that encourage an approach to personal development connected to a collective purpose. Studying the experiential knowledge of the aforementioned terms in this context presents an interesting opportunity. However, I also find it fascinating that these words are associated with an exercise community. I am, of course, biased by my background and experience exercising in a society where such practices are often related to individual self-realisation, capitalist-driven ideas of consumption for the sake of looking a certain way, and body images determined by a male gaze, as well as achieving a specific self-image through social media. RTM stands in contrast to this Western-based exercise culture. In RTM, I find a community that exercises with a purpose extending far beyond individualistic aspirations and benefits.

In terms of encouraging values of care, solidarity, social responsibility, and community, I believe that there is much to learn from communities such as RTM. We can learn, first and foremost, about their approach to exercise as something that should encourage mutual empowerment and be accessible and fun for everyone, regardless of physical ability. Furthermore, Western-based exercise communities can learn from the use of exercise to promote social values, express solidarity, and serve as a space that brings people from diverse backgrounds together. This could challenge neoliberal aspects of Western-based exercise culture and promote exercise as a more socially sustainable and collectively strengthening practice that fosters inclusive, open-minded, and socially responsible societies. As sites of sport and exercise have great social and cultural significance in many Western societies, I believe that they have the potential to be a space in which we can become better at nurturing collective values. Understanding the capacity of the RTM community and similar initiatives thus has the

potential to unfold the use of exercise and other activities in terms of promoting a culture of peace and fostering a greater sense of collective care and responsibility.

While this potentiality addresses a spatially transferable knowledge obtained from this study of exercise as a practice that can change and express social norms and values, examining the use of exercise in contexts such as this might also be valuable to academic fields engaged in studies of physical activity and exercise. This research has gained insight into how exercise is utilised in this specific, militarised, settler-colonial context. By drawing on lived experiences, we can understand the different motivations and effects of exercising in various settings. As this study suggests, exercising is a complex and multilayered experience in this context. This highlights the spatial significance of where the exercise practice is carried out and its capacity to hold and transform various emotional and physical sensations in violent, conflict-ridden environments. As an everyday practice in an exceptional setting, exercising serves both as a way to disrupt and encounter the continuity of this exceptionality. These findings contribute to existing research such as that of Abulhawa (2023) on the Skatepal project and the positive impact of skateboarding practices on children and youth in the West Bank, as well as that of Thorpe (2014) on how parkour is used in Gaza to overcome everyday obstacles, build resilience and overcome immobilities. Together, such studies might contribute to a deeper understanding of, for example, Palestinian exercise culture, resilience building through everyday exercise practices, potential decolonial approaches to SDP, and how physical activity can be used to counter immobility and foster transnational networks of solidarity.

In conclusion, it is possible to identify several points of interest for further examination based on the findings of this research. I believe that the topic studied and the approaches used in this research have potential in terms of developing theory, gaining a deeper conceptual understanding, and exploring the interconnection between certain concepts. However, beyond its possible theoretical and academic implications, the knowledge obtained from this study might hold greater significance in a non-academic context. It is my hope that by centring the lived experience of those whose everyday lives are touched by war and violent conflict, we start decolonising our underlying assumptions and perceptions about what peace and violence look like. Hiba, Jalal, George, Elias, Sajeda, and Abdel know not only what settler-colonial violence looks like – they also know how it feels, physically and emotionally. They experience it every day. And even though they should not have to, they also resist it every day. They use exercise as a creative means of expression, to build resilience, to find freedom, and to create ‘a window of hope and light.’ They represent a community with great social capacity, and I argue that they possess immense potential as they hold great knowledge and experience. This

knowledge and experience is valuable and can be used by Palestinians to envision what peace and freedom should look like in Palestine once they get a chance to implement this vision. Meanwhile, they fight for their freedom, but the fight is not only theirs. The fight is mine and everyone else's, because we carry a collective responsibility for their freedom, peace, and security, just as we do for dismantling the systems and structures that inherently sustain a culture of violence that hinders our progress towards a more just and peaceful society.

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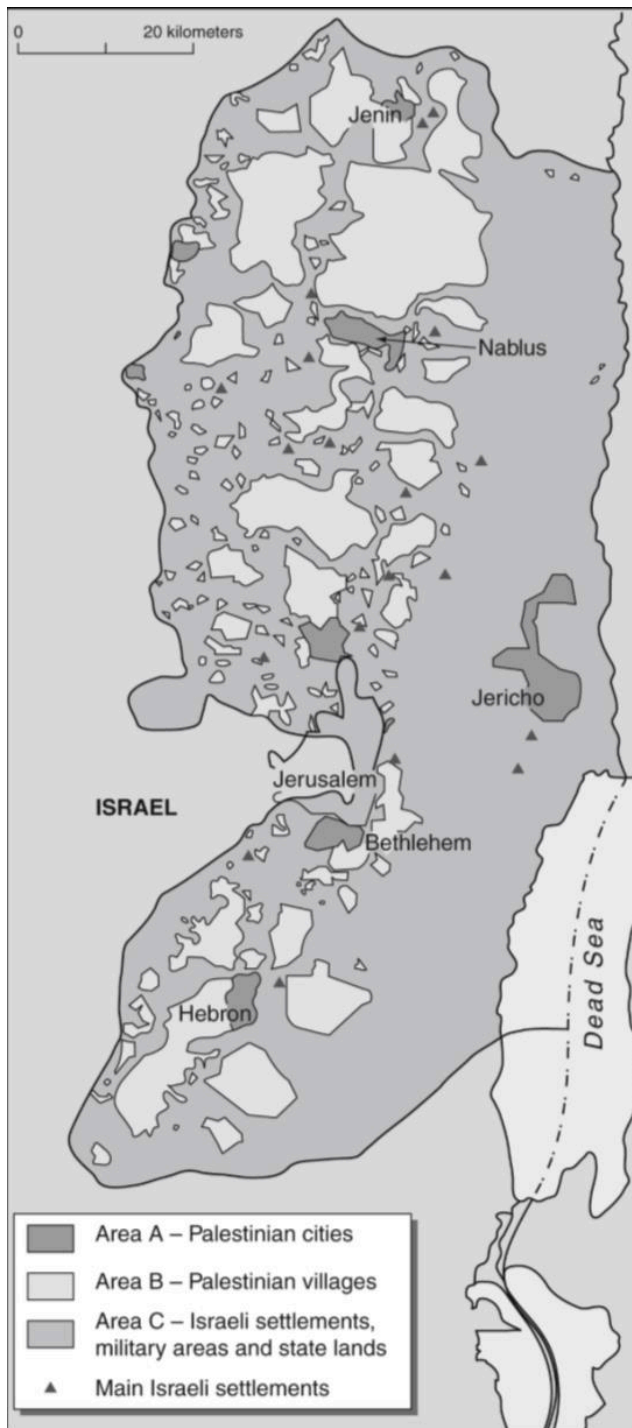
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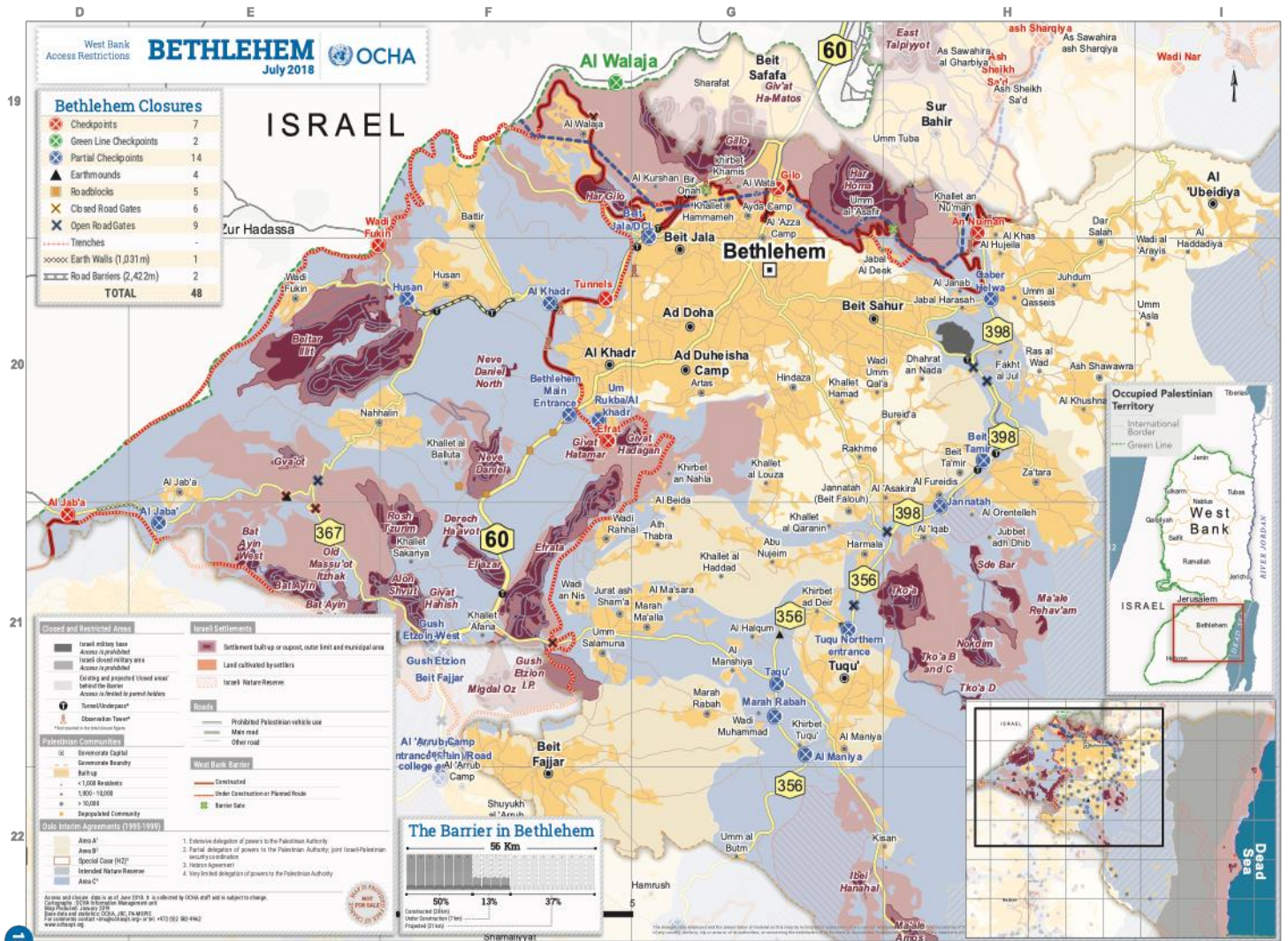
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Appendices

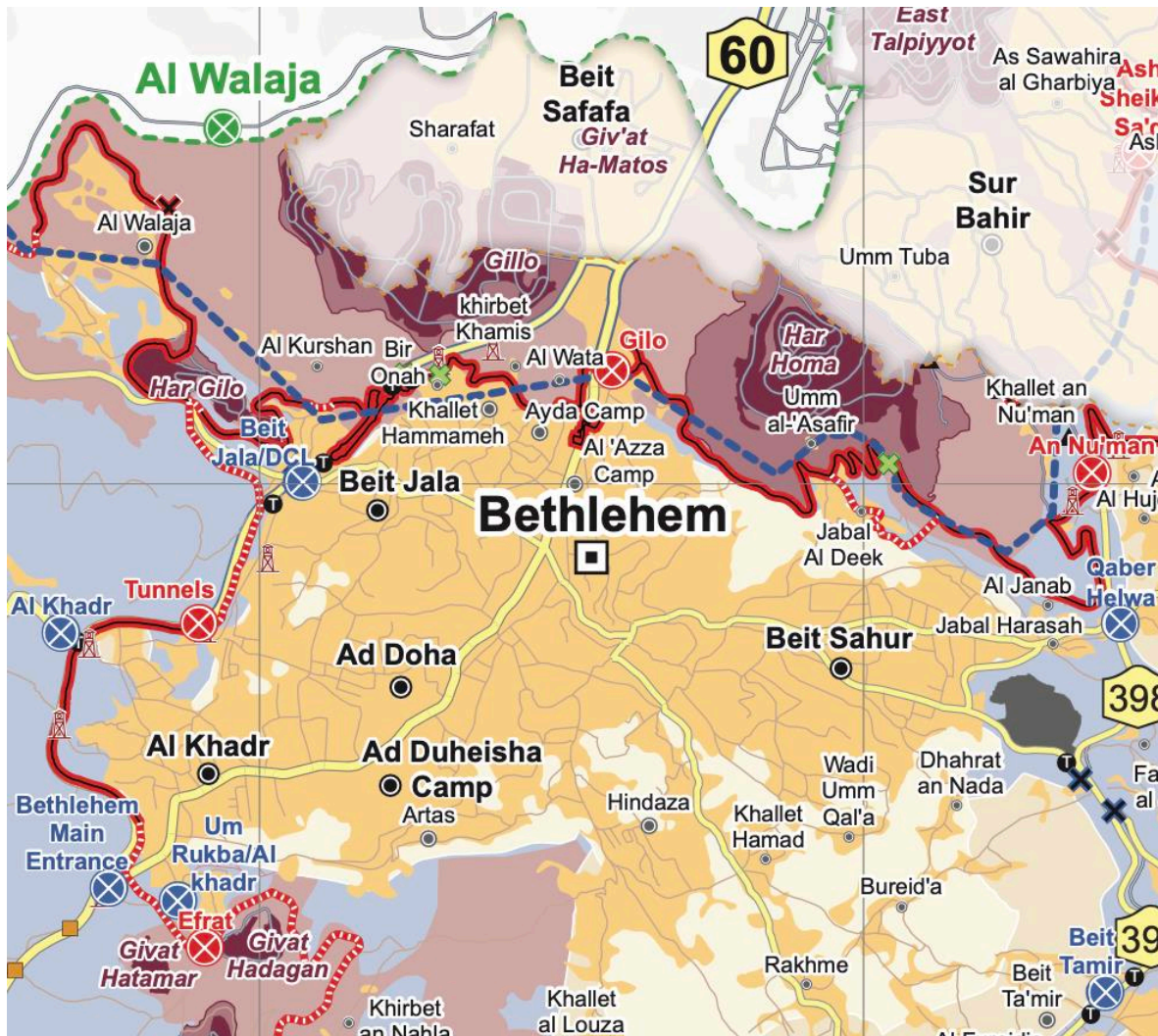
Appendix I: Maps and Geographical Illustrations



Map 1. Map of the West Bank showing Areas A, B and C. Source: Gelvin, 2021.



Map 2. Map of Bethlehem Governorate, including separation barriers. Source: OCHA, 2019.



Map 3. Close-up of Bethlehem city and adjacent towns, including separation barriers (Based on Map 2). Source: OCHA, 2019.

Appendix II: List of Interviews

No.	Name	Date	Duration	Platform
1	Elias	November 30, 2024	33 min 55 s	Microsoft Teams
2	Sajeda	December 28, 2024	40 min 13 s	Google Meet
3	Jalal	January 9, 2025	30 min 1 s	Microsoft Teams
4	Hiba	January 13, 2025	51 min 56 s	Microsoft Teams
5	Abdel	January 14, 2025	49 min 11 s	Microsoft Teams
6	George	February 7, 2025	1 h 4 min 58 s	Microsoft Teams
7	George	February 20, 2025	25 min 26 s	Microsoft Teams

Appendix III: Pre-formulated Interview Questions

- When did you start joining RTM's Activities?
- Do you remember how you got to know about RTM and what made you join them the first time?
- How often do you join the activities, and it is mainly Tuesdays or Fridays?
- Do you like running/walking or the muscle exercises the most?
- What feeling does it give you to exercise?
- What role does exercise have for you and in your life?
- Why do you exercise - or why is it important to you?
- Is it mainly because you find it fun, is it for the social aspect or maybe primarily for your health?
- How does your body feel when you exercise? (Before, during and after)
- What about your mind and mental state – Where does it go during exercise, how do you feel mentally? (Before, during and after)
- How do you relate to the name 'Right to Movement'? Do you think about this right when you exercise?
- How would you describe the RTM community? (From a more objective standpoint)
- How does it feel for you to be part of the RTM community? (Subjectively)
- When you go outside of Bethlehem to exercise or hike, which places do you remember going?
- What is your relation to these places?
- What does it mean for you to be able to go to these places?
- How would you describe the areas that you run/hike in? Is there anything specific you pay attention to when you go to these places?
- Is there anything you want to add or something related to this that is relevant that we haven't talked about? Maybe some feedback for me, or aspects I left out?

Appendix IV: The Right to Movement T-shirt

RTM's participants can purchase items (primarily tote bags and t-shirts) with RTM's logo and print. They mainly sell T-shirts in different colours with the logo and print visible in the photo examples below:



Photo A. Front print on T-shirt– RTM's logo (Photograph taken by author).



Photo B. Back print on T-shirt (Photograph taken by author).