

Sandra Pereira Vinagre*

Nameless graves, regulated funerals, and cemetery erasure: Memoricide in Palestine

ABSTRACT

For more than half a century, Israeli authorities have withheld Palestinian bodies, burying them anonymously in concealed 'cemeteries of numbers'. Drawing on legal records, forensic assessments and ethnographic research, this article documents systemic mismanagement that breaches the Geneva Conventions, the Hague Regulations and Israeli jurisprudence on the dignity of the dead, and examines restrictions on funerals and the erasure or repurposing of Palestinian burial grounds. Framed by necropolitics (Mbembe), necropolitical violence (Bargu) and grievability (Butler), it argues that these practices, by normalising sovereign control over death and mourning, constitute memoricide – the deliberate erasure of collective memory.

KEYWORDS

Palestine
Memoricide
Necropolitics
Mourning

* Sandra Pereira Vinagre is a researcher at the Centre for Classical Studies, University of Lisbon, focusing on how ancient theatre is interpreted, adapted and staged in politically and socially turbulent contexts. She holds a master's degree and earned her PhD in Classical Reception in 2022, awarded summa cum laude, from the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. She has published several articles and book chapters, and is the author of "As Mulheres Troianas da Síria" (Syrian Trojan Women), published in 2024.

For decades, the State of Israel has withheld the bodies and human remains of Palestinians killed at different stages of the conflict, burying them in secret burial grounds located within closed military zones and therefore inaccessible to civilians. Both the total number of these sites and their precise locations remain unknown, apart from four that have been discovered (Abdallah 2022: 13-14)¹. Palestinians refer to them as ‘cemeteries of numbers’, because each grave bears a numbered metal plate rather than a name. Israeli security authorities designate these sites ‘cemeteries of enemy combatants’, yet those buried there include not only combatants, honoured by Palestinians as martyrs, but also individuals labelled by Israel as ‘infiltrators’, that is, displaced persons who attempted to return to their homes or land after 1948 and who were arrested, imprisoned, and died in custody.

Israeli authorities generally do not inform families whether a person has died, nor do they notify relatives if that person has been buried in a ‘cemetery of numbers’. Many families are left in prolonged uncertainty, sustaining the hope that sons, husbands, brothers, or parents might one day return. This deliberate withholding of information disrupts mourning rituals, prolongs grief, and inflicts psychological harm on families and communities, effectively denying Palestinian and other Arab families the opportunity to perform funeral rites, to mourn publicly, and to visit the graves of their relatives.

Against this backdrop, the Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center (JLAC) is an organisation dedicated to assisting Palestinian families in recovering the human remains of their relatives. In 2008, they launched The National Campaign to Retrieve War Victims and Unravel the Fate of Those Missing: We have Names, We have a Homeland (JLAC 2015). After a two-year legal struggle, a family succeeded, for the first time in six decades, in recovering the remains of a relative through a petition to the Israeli Supreme Court. The case concerned Mashhoor Al-Aroui, a fighter killed in 1976 during a resistance operation and buried in one of the ‘cemeteries of numbers’ (JLAC 2015: 30-33). The family waited 34 years to bury him, which illustrates both the profound human cost of Israel’s policy of withholding human remains and the broader political significance of reclaiming the right to mourn and honour the dead.

The successful return of Aroui’s remains revealed an additional dimension: the conditions in which remains were kept in the ‘cemeteries of numbers’. This concerned not only failures of identification but also the overall state in which remains were stored. An expert assessment prepared by Professor Yehuda Hess of the National Center of Forensic Medicine, in the context of the exhumation of Aroui’s remains, documented serious deficiencies in the administration and general conditions of these cemeteries. According to JLAC, the report found that:

[...] some bodies were alarmingly “lost” and a number of graves ended up being empty due to missing remains. In certain cases, even when the remains were found in the graves, they were unable to be identified. The procedure used to identify the deceased was to store the remains in plastic bags, labeled with an identification number using a felt-tip pen. Unfortunately, the bags and the labeling had eroded over time. [...] Some bodies

and remains were not even placed in bags or identified at all. The layout of the graves also obscured the ability to identify the remains as they are in very close proximity to each other, causing the remains of a body to be found in more than one grave [...] In some cases, graves were dug in a single long grave with no soil separating the bodies and remains. [...] some graves were identified using numbered plates; however, the plates themselves were not bound to the graves [...] there were traces of cows’ dung... (JLAC 2015: 16-17)

Taken together, these findings point to systemic shortcomings: remains went unaccounted for; labelling and packaging degraded over time; some remains were unlabelled or not bagged at all; the proximity of graves and the use of single long trench graves led to commingled remains; and markers were not securely attached to specific graves. Such conditions hinder reliable identification, compromise chain-of-custody and record-keeping, and fall short of internationally recognised standards for the dignified management of the dead. These deficiencies are consistent with testimonies by residents living near these cemeteries who witnessed Israeli forces bringing bodies for burial, and with information provided by the Head of Research at the NGO Al-Marsad, who was part of the team that discovered one of the ‘cemeteries of numbers’ in 1985, explaining that, when it was first found, there were no visible signs that it was a cemetery.² It appeared to be an abandoned field, without barbed wire, where bodies wrapped in sheets had been buried. Once this was exposed, Israeli authorities promptly formalised the site: they fenced it with barbed wire, numbered the graves, and placed a sign reading ‘cemetery of dead enemies’.

Beyond burial conditions and record-keeping failures, ethnographic work inside Israel’s forensic apparatus has documented practices that further entrench the dispossession of Palestinian dead. Anthropologist Meira Weiss was among the first to examine how Palestinian bodies were treated within the Israeli forensic system as part of militarised and colonial practices. Her conclusions, based on six years’ observation at the Israeli National Center of Forensic Medicine (NCFM), also known as Abu Kabir, were published in a monograph titled *Over Their Dead Bodies* (Weiss 2014), in which she notes the following:

In the first Intifada, the [Israeli] army allowed the centre [NCFM] to harvest organs from Palestinians using a military regulation that an autopsy must be conducted on every killed Palestinian. Autopsies were accompanied with organs harvest. The Skin Bank and other organ banks used these organs for transplantation, research and teaching medicine. Many of the centre workers referred to the first intifada (1987–1993) as the “good days”, when organs harvesting was conducted consistently and freely, compared to other periods. (Weiss 2014: 149; quoted in Daher-Nashif 2019: 18)

According to a 2009 interview, Professor Yehuda Hess – who, in the context of the exhumation of Mashhoor al-Aroui’s remains, prepared the report documenting the treatment of Palestinian remains in the ‘cemeteries of numbers’ – acknowledged that skin, corneas, heart valves, and bones had been harvested from deceased Palestinians without the knowledge or consent of

¹ Drawing on ethnographic research, archival material, and family testimonies, this study offers a comprehensive account of the ‘cemeteries of numbers’ since the 1960s.

² These testimonies can be heard in France 24’s Reporters segment, ‘Israel’s Secret Cemeteries’ (15 October 2010), video report, from 07:00 onwards, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpPU4uOwy_s (accessed 1 October 2025).

their families.³ These accounts of forensic practice intensify the ethical stakes concerning consent, dignity, and the custody of the dead.

From a legal standpoint, the practice of withholding the remains of deceased enemies and the conditions in which they were kept stand in violation of Israel's obligations under relevant international treaties and conventions – including the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Regulations – which set out rules concerning the dignified treatment of withheld bodies and human remains. Nevertheless, the principle of the dignity of the deceased constitutes JLAC's core legal argument for demanding the return of remains to families. This is particularly significant given that Israeli law itself upholds the principle of 'dignity of the dead', grounded in the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) and affirmed in several judicial rulings. In litigation relating to victims of the 2002 Israeli military offensive in the Jenin Refugee Camp, Israeli courts affirmed that the dignity of the deceased is paramount regardless of the deceased's alleged role. In other cases, courts have held that this principle extends to those interred in the so-called 'cemeteries of numbers'⁴.

Yet despite these norms, the practice persists, highlighting a broader pattern in which legal rules are selectively applied or strategically reinterpreted to justify policies of control. A striking example is a 2017 ruling by the Israeli High Court concerning three cases involving withheld Palestinian bodies. The Court acknowledged that no legal authority permitted the practice, rejected the government's argument of 'reciprocity' (that is, withholding Palestinian bodies because Hamas holds Israeli captives), and ordered the release of the remains. The Court simultaneously suspended its decision for six months to allow the government to enact legislation that could retrospectively authorise the practice (JLAC 2025: 3). The outcome was paradoxical: the Court recognised the practice as unlawful while creating the conditions for its legalisation. This contradiction underscores how humanitarian principles can be set aside when political considerations are given priority over universal rights.

For Palestinians, however, the withholding of bodies is not merely a legal anomaly but a deliberate form of collective punishment that extends suffering beyond the individual to the family and the community. By denying relatives the possibility of burying their dead, Israel is perceived as seeking to discipline and humiliate families and to prolong grief – a practice explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Regulations, and one that also raises profound ethical concerns.

In October 2015, this practice was reinstated in modified form: instead of burying Palestinians in the so-called 'cemeteries of numbers', bodies began to be stored in freezers (Daher-Nashif 2018: 181).⁵ This shift did not represent a break with previous policies but rather a continuation of the same logic of control, whereby the bodies of the deceased are withheld from families

and communities, denying them the possibility of dignified burial and collective mourning. The UN Committee against Torture also addressed the issue, albeit only in 2016, calling on Israel to 'return the bodies of the Palestinians [...] as soon as possible so they can be buried in accordance with their traditions and religious customs, and to avoid that similar situations are repeated in the future'.⁶ This recommendation carries considerable moral weight but has limited coercive effect.

For the Israeli state, however, the withholding of Palestinian human remains serves a dual purpose: it functions as a bargaining chip in political negotiations while being framed as a matter of security. Even when bodies are returned, release is made conditional on the strict regulations of funerals and mourning rituals. Families are frequently required to hold burials at night, limit attendance, refrain from establishing mourning houses, and, in some cases, cooperate with the Israeli authorities in organising the ceremonies. These restrictions are officially justified on the grounds of preventing funerals from turning into mass demonstrations or recruitment opportunities for resistance movements. Yet, in practice, they extend collective punishment into the sphere of mourning. Within Butler's framework, these measures do not merely repress mourning; they actively constitute the public sphere. By ensuring that certain images do not circulate, that the names of the dead are not publicly spoken, and that particular losses are not acknowledged, they render Palestinian suffering invisible, derealising the violence inflicted while reinforcing a nationalist order that depends on such erasure (Butler 2004: 37-38).

By contrast, for many Palestinians, funerals are less about recruitment than about reaffirming collective identity, memory, and continuity, as attested by Nuha, whose husband died in an Israeli prison: 'When we managed to get him home, all the people came [...] His death and his loss made them all want to continue his struggle, his cause, his aim... They all promised that his death would push all Palestinians to never surrender' (ShalhoubKevorkian 2014: 23). These dynamics directly challenge Israeli attempts to suppress commemoration: as the experience of loss becomes inseparable from the broader political struggle, spaces of power are generated and transformed into resistance and hope. As ShalhoubKevorkian observes,

The mourning expected at a funeral is rewritten as a celebration of resistance, which is transformed into a 'wedding', an event that represents continuity, rather than endings. In its settler colonial ambitions of destruction and replacement, Israeli policies assume death to signify an ending [...] The practices of honouring the dead, and of fighting for proper burial spaces and rituals, intervenes and 'haunts' the official state policy of eliminating Palestinian place and history. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014: 27)

In response to Israeli restrictions, many Palestinian families have chosen to resist by refusing conditions imposed on the return of

3 For discussion of these allegations, see Scheper-Hughes and Boström (2013), which documents a troubling history of illicit practices involving cadavers at the Israeli National Center of Forensic Medicine (Abu Kabir).

4 For the legal arguments advanced before the Israeli courts, see JLAC (2015). For an up-to-date status note on the legal track, see JLAC (2025).

5 Daher-Nashif (2018) documents that, during the 2015 'al-Quds' uprising, more than 80 Palestinians, 15 of them women and girls, were killed and their corpses held in freezers. Drawing on interviews with families, the article theorises necropolitical and biopolitical control over burial, grief, and the temporal and spatial order of death.

6 UN Committee against Torture, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Israel, 3 June 2016, UN Doc. CAT/C/ISR/CO/5, para. 43. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/CAT/C/ISR/CO/5> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

the human remains of their relatives, even postponing funerals rather than accepting terms that would mute their grief and depoliticise their loss.⁷ These negotiations around mourning have also shifted social roles: as Daher-Nashif (2020: 952) notes, women played an active role in these discussions and, for the first time in many Palestinian communities, carried the coffins of their sons and daughters, a practice traditionally reserved for men. Other families and communities have resorted to even more immediate strategies to prevent the Israeli authorities from seizing the body. In one such case, 20-year-old Ali Shiyukhi was buried within minutes of his death, still dressed in the bloodstained clothes in which he had been shot and without any traditional or religious rites, leaving his family no opportunity to say goodbye (Wahbe 2020: 2). His friends covered him with a blanket and carried him directly to the town cemetery, knowing that, had they waited to prepare his body according to customary practices (washing, shrouding in white and holding a funeral), the authorities might have intervened and placed him in a freezer.⁸

These varied forms of resistance underscore the centrality of mourning as a site of political struggle. Precisely because funerals and burial rituals hold such collective significance, Israeli policies have not only withheld bodies but have also targeted cemeteries themselves, erasing or repurposing spaces of memory and heritage. Significant portions of Jerusalem's Mamilla Muslim cemetery – in use since at least the seventh century and traditionally believed to contain the graves of companions of the Prophet Muhammad, alongside remains from the pre-Islamic and Crusader periods encompassing both Muslim and Christian burials – were demolished to make way for parking lots, streets, a shopping mall, and, eventually, the Museum of Tolerance. The cemetery's historical and religious importance had long been acknowledged: in 1927 the Supreme Muslim Council formally declared it a historic site, and in 1944 the British Mandate authorities designated it an antiquities site. Despite sustained objections from Palestinian families, international lawyers, heritage organisations and scholars (including petitions submitted to various UN bodies to protect the sacred site), construction nevertheless proceeded. On its website, the institution presents its 'vision' as follows:

The Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem is located in the holy city of three major religions. Dedicated to promoting tolerance and human dignity, the museum shares lessons from world history and universal Jewish values, while creating powerful dialogue between individuals from all cultures and religions.⁹

The dissonance between this declared mission and the effective erasure of one of Jerusalem's oldest Muslim cemeteries underscores a profound contradiction.¹⁰ Similar controversies have arisen at the al-Yusufiyah cemetery, a twelfth-century cemetery, where excavations and levelling associated with a planned

national/biblical park prompted allegations of grave destruction; and in Jaffa, where an eighteenth-century Muslim cemetery was partially demolished in 2020 amid litigation over a municipal shelter project. Since 2023, military operations in Gaza have damaged or razed multiple cemeteries, with Israel invoking military necessity (including alleged tunnel use by Hamas), while critics emphasise cultural-religious protection and potential violations of international law.

Taken together, the withholding of human remains in the 'cemeteries of numbers', the restrictions imposed on funerals, and the destruction or repurposing of burial grounds point beyond the management of individual remains to what has been described as 'memoricide'¹¹, i.e., the deliberate erasure of spaces of collective memory, which further constrains public mourning, memory, and place. As Wahbe notes,

The creation of a site of commemoration of the Jewish Shoah through the Museum of Tolerance mimics a reburial, in which the memory of Shoah victims is transported and placed in Jerusalem as their proper burial ground, giving them a rightful claim over the territory. Such an act, therefore, is not coincidental but rather an assertion of settler hierarchy even in death – in which Palestinian-Arab traditions and history are inferior to those of the Jewish dead. (Wahbe 2020: 329)

The practices described – the withholding of bodies in 'cemeteries of numbers' or in freezers, the regulation of funerals, and the reconfiguration of cemeteries – exemplify the extension of sovereign power over death that Mbembe theorises as necropolitics: 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2003: 11). In this sense, sovereign power subjects life to the power of death, producing 'death-worlds' in which vast populations are reduced to the status of the 'living dead' by the conditions of life imposed upon them (Mbembe 2003: 40). Daher-Nashif (2018) develops these insights for the Palestinian context, tracing how necropolitics operates not only by deciding who may live or die but also through the management of dead bodies and the regulation of burial and mourning practices.

More recently, Bargu (2016) has used the term 'necropolitical violence' to refer to practices that target the realm of the dead – the corpse, burial and mourning rituals, graves and cemeteries. For Bargu, the issue is not the reduction of the living to the status of 'living dead', as in Mbembe's account, but rather 'the dishonouring, disciplining and punishment of the living through the utilisation of the dead as postmortem objects and sites of violence' (Bargu 2016). In short, these are practices that deploy the dead in order to govern and punish the living. The Palestinian case outlined in this article – numbered graves, freezer retention, restrictions on burials, and the destruction or repurposing of cemeteries – exemplifies this necropolitical violence.

Butler's theorisation of grievability (2004; 2009) is equally

7 For further details and additional testimonies, see Daher-Nashif (2020).

8 For an overview of mourning rituals and death rites practiced in Palestine, including gendered roles, see Abu-Rabia and Khalil (2012).

9 Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem (MOTJ), 'Vision', official website, n.d. Available at: <https://motj.org.il> (accessed 1 October 2025).

10 For the Mamilla cemetery and the Museum of Tolerance controversy, see Belli (2022). Using legal, planning, and archival sources, Belli argues that the 2007 Israeli High Court of Justice decision regarding the Museum of Tolerance and the Court's 2008 clarification effectively codified, in law, the supremacy of Jewish bodies and afterlives over non-Jewish ones in the name of Israel's values.

11 On 'memoricide', see Masalha (esp. 135-147), who details repeated raids and document seizures by Israeli forces – for example, the Palestinian Research Center in Beirut (1982) and the Arab Studies Society archive in East Jerusalem (2001) – and notes that, in 1958, Israeli authorities destroyed approximately 27,000 books, most of them pre-1948 Palestinian textbooks, 'claiming that they were either useless or threatened the state'. See also Amit (2011) for an account of the Jewish National and University Library's 'book salvage' operation, which incorporated tens of thousands of privately owned Palestinian volumes into its holdings.

crucial here, particularly given prohibitions on funerals and restrictions on public grieving. Refocusing attention on mourning and recognition, Butler shows that grievability is not intrinsic but conferred by cultural and political frames that determine which losses may appear. Restrictions on rituals (night-time burials, limits on attendance, bans on mourning houses) do not merely suppress grief; they actively constitute a public sphere in which Palestinian loss is derealised. Thus, the same apparatus that administers the dead (Mbembe) and weaponises the post-mortem realm (Bagu) also produces ungrievable lives (Butler), turning death and mourning into a field of control. At the same time, such prohibitions can galvanise resistance – precisely what the Israeli state seeks to forestall through such measures.

As Mbembe (2003) argued, the colonial occupation of Palestine constitutes the most accomplished form of necropower, combining disciplinary, biopolitical and necropolitical logics. The analysis presented here – from the ‘cemeteries of numbers’ to freezers, from court rulings to restrictions on funerals, and from the erasure or repurposing of Palestinian burial grounds – demonstrates the continuity and progressive normalisation of state governance over death, mourning and memory, and, following Bagu (2016), the use of the dead to punish and discipline the living.

In this light, the current genocide in Gaza should not be read as an isolated exception but as an intensification of a long-standing apparatus that neutralises names, rituals, burial sites, and collective remembrance. In sum, this is a politics of memoricide ■

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