Gazan tunnels dig deep in the geopolitical imagination. They are argued to play a key role in re-establishing a blockaded economy, transporting people and goods, sparking fear and hope at the same time. Indeed, they played a prominent role in the spike in conflicts centring in Gaza in 2014 [1]. Briefly, I want to ask why these tunnels matter for those thinking critically about territory. I suggest that tunnels help us form new senses of space. They are “things” in their own right: they have potential to affect bodies and war. But they are also something distinctly lacking: voids between rocks, spaces in limbo, clandestine but somehow full of structure. At once, they (re)build and challenge ‘flat’ notions of territory (Elden, 2010). They are simultaneously architectures of opening and blocking, mobility and restriction, hope and fear, support and threat. Tunnels make an intervention on the way that we do territory.

Gazan tunnels necessarily come with a prefix. Terror tunnels. Smuggle tunnels. Attack tunnels. (Hecht, 2014). Whilst these tunnels have distinctive histories, with distinct functions, distinct morphologies and distinct ownerships, these complex networks have been at once folded into one, and expanded as network. How is this possible? The “neutralisation” of tunnels by Israeli and Egyptian forces were prompted by fears they allowed the smuggling of weapons, explosives, and soldiers. From points scattered across Gaza, tunnels have been used by Hamas and other Islamic Jihadists in the kidnapping and killing of IDF soldiers (Rudoren, 2014). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that tunnels enabled Hamas to “abduct and murder civilians and IDF soldiers via simultaneous attacks… that penetrate our territory” (Netanyahu, cited in Sherwood 2014). Tunnels lurk in the deep, dark, ambiguous spaces of the imagination. But why?

By considering a politics of verticality, we understand territory as a pretext and arena of conflict, filled with nuances and complexities (Weizman, 2002). “Flat” notions of territory as bounded, sovereign space, latent with power, were inherited from the political and military spatialisations of the modern state (Agnew, 1994). Through doctrines of discovery, vocabularies of exploration, and technologies of mapping, territory was established as hegemonic sovereignty and superiority over land and people. This is necessarily tied to the formation of the Israeli nation state, building a narrative of isolation by anti-Israel animosity, where security forms a cohesive identity (Newman, 2000): “There is only one place for decent, civilised people to stand. That’s to stand with Israel” (Netanyahu, cited in Telegraph, 2014). Distance under the ground is folded into difference, realised as threat. More simply, it’s no accident that we look at maps from above.

This builds on imaginations of the underground as dark, as unseen, a place without convention. If we take as our logic of perception one framed from above (Gregory, 2004), from high points and vistas (Der Derian, 1976), or a view from nowhere (Agnew, 1994), territory is viewed as oppositional. The surface of the earth marks a border between rationality and chaos, between sovereign state and its anarchic other. The spaces we can see and those we can’t. Even the phrase ‘underground’ in a rhetorical tongue gestures to radicalism, illicitness – something “inherent” to terrorism (Elden, 2013).

These geographical imaginations of tunnels recirculated and redistributed flat notions of territory. In the Oslo Agreement, Israel insisted on keeping control of underground resources, and control of airspace (Weizman, 2007). On first instinct it seems like a classic attempt at territory – securing power of space. Only this time, it’s 3D. But to what extent was this really a new form of subterranean sovereignty – an attempt to “secure the volume” of territory (Elden, 2013)?
Indeed, presence (and power) is often conceptualised as layers, as strata, as depth – to establish yourself as prior is to have prior-ity (Wolfe, 2006). But as seen in the “neutralisation” of tunnels, simply blowing up the entrance doesn’t stop the tunnel (Rayman, 2014). They lie in passages that can reconnect, with multiple openings (Hecht, 2014). In emphasising territory as linear and as plane, as simply bounded space, we translate a whole host of synonyms that serve to reinforce it – walls, blocks, borders, kill-zones (Weizman, 2007). But the more we try to iron out folded surfaces, and flatten terrains, the more hybrid, fractured, contested, and contradictory those spaces become.

With this in mind, the smuggling tunnels in Rafah, fractured between the border of Gaza and Egypt force us to think a little differently. Where 80 per cent of people rely on some kind of aid, these tunnels supplement the import of basic foodstuffs with commodities that supply up to two-thirds of products on sale in Gaza (Sharp, 2009). In a disrupted Palestinian space and a landscape of blockage, sites of destruction (these “spatial scars”), become a main option of public gathering (Azoulay, 2009). Therefore, smuggle tunnels provide a possibility of rebuilding, of movement and flow under a security gaze (Adey, 2013).

But this isn’t to get lost in abstraction. Smuggling stresses the reality, the materiality, or the brutality that territory provokes. In images of the tunnels we see winches, wood-joists, walkie-talkies, bulldozers, wheelbarrows, vehicles driven through, cigarettes, sugar, stones, cement arches, wires, lightbulbs, bodies (alive and dead), calves and stones. There is constant coordination with the Egyptian border – informing of exact distances, depths and locations (Sharp, 2009). If a house has to be bought as disguised opening, the owner receives profit, and compensation in case it is discovered and destroyed (Sherwood, 2014). Therefore, we see orchestration, organisation, construction, and compartmentalisation of territory. Territory shapes, and is shaped by strategy (Elden, 2010).

A Palestinian student commented on being dragged through one of these tunnels in a plastic sheath – “I was between life and death – the slides are just large coffins” (cited in Harb, 2014). Therefore, tunnels are unique spaces of limbo. Many workers lose their lives, from suffocation, to bomb attacks and to collapses. There’s a fear of not being able to return to the surface, a life in exile, and a life in fruitless survival (Bridge 2013). At the same time the student wanted to study in Egypt, to use better facilities to transfer skills back into Gaza (Harb, 2014). Further, in an economy that generates over $700m a year, those benefiting the most are the ones who own the tunnels, mostly business owners (Sharp, 2009). Therefore, asymmetries are entrenched and redistributed as well as challenged. So perhaps territory here serves as a process. It is something done, secured, but also undermined.

To conclude, Mahmoud Ramlawi works as a digger in the smuggle tunnels (see Harb, 2014). He earns a living for his family, embroiled in a network of goods, capital and people, by negotiation, and by necessity. He had to drag to the surface the body of his friend, who had been sitting in a pool of mud for eight days after a bomb attack. He shakes the hand of a business owner whose livelihood cannot survive without his work. A seemingly simple void of earth then creates unique spaces of rights, hopes, fears, and obligations.

Tunnels are confusing and messy. But they’re also highly organised. They connect spaces, creating relations. But they’re also spaces in their own right. Spaces to slide through – heads tucked in. Spaces in the imagination – of hope, of fear, of past and future. Tunnels demand us to rethink the ways we think about territory. We can understand territory as nuanced, where something seemingly as mundane as planning can be spatialised and mobilised for political means (Weizman, 2002).

We might respond in the way we conduct warfare. Rising out of the ground to abduct soldiers (BBC, 2014), or punching through the very fabric of a city (Weizman, 2007). In this case, the politics of verticality is rephrased by the IDF: how might a city itself be a “terrain of tunnels, bunkers, twists and turns...” (Baker, cited in Gregory, 2004: 201)? We might recirculate common understandings, reinforcing our beliefs with bigger walls and bigger trenches, and stories of demons rising from the ground (Rudoren, 2014).

Tunnels make an important interjection by suggesting that we can only understand territorial conflicts if we acknowledge that they crucially depend on a line of stories, as well as a line of stones (Fosberg, 2003). Just as power struggles seem ever more complicated in a fractured world, so too are the spaces in which those conflicts rely on.
Footnote

[1] My dance around naming these events is both intentional and problematic. There cannot be a neutral naming for events where over 2000 people died, and actions were so emotionally invested. Operation Protective Edge. The Gaza Offensive. The 2014 crisis. Even the order I list them betrays my “spacings” of categorisation, where a presence necessarily shrouds an absence (Gregory, 2004). Like the notions of territory and geopolitics they illuminate, each are deployed and utilised to justify political means and ends.

References


Gazan Tunnels and a Politics of Verticality
Written by Brodie McGhie-Fraser


Written by: Brodie McGhie-Fraser
Written at: University of Durham
Written for: Noam Leshem
Date written: December 2014