



Guest editorial

Urbicide, neo-colonial subjugation and the Gaza Strip



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On May 21, 2021, the Gaza Strip once again became the centre of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The firing of rockets into Israel by Hamas was followed by an intense Israeli bombardment of the Strip. The bombing ceased 11 days later, leaving 256 Palestinians dead (including at least 129 civilians) and deep wounds in Gaza's urban landscape. Some 1165 housing and commercial units were destroyed, and 1128 were seriously damaged; in addition, 58 schools and 28 health facilities (including the only COVID laboratory in the Strip) were affected (OCHA oPt, 2021). Instances of destruction even more wanton than that which took place in May 2021 occurred in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014. In the 2008–2009 conflict alone, for instance, 1400 Palestinians, including 300 children, were killed over a 22-day period; as well, around 30,000 homes, along with hundreds of factories, workshops, government buildings, police stations, livestock farms and orchards, were destroyed. Many other structures were severely damaged (including schools and hospitals) (Amnesty International, 2009; OCHA oPt, 2009).

Violent – albeit temporally brief – conflict has become the norm in the Gaza Strip. The synopated course of the conflict in Gaza may create the impression of an acceptable normality interrupted only by sporadic armed clashes. However, this is not the case. In fact, an unconventional war is going on in the Gaza Strip – one that began in June 2007, when Israel (and Egypt) initiated a land, air and sea blockade of the Strip. The violent phases of war, in this regard, have punctuated a long-term *siege*, which, while largely invisible to the global public, has devastated social, economic, ecological, and cultural life in the Gaza Strip. Because of the blockade, the Strip has become a prison, where nothing and nobody can legally enter or leave without Israeli permission. The infamous tunnels built by Hamas do not significantly alter this picture (Pelham, 2012). The UN estimates that in the absence of blockade and military conflicts, the poverty level in Gaza in 2017 would have been around 15 percent (UNCTAD, 2020). Instead, the poverty level in the Strip rose from 40 percent to 56 percent between 2007 and 2017.

It is against this backdrop of both protracted and acute violence in the Gaza Strip that deploying the concept of urbicide is a *conceptually*

useful and politically necessary move. To begin, it is *conceptually useful* to widen the scope of urbicide beyond its usual, somewhat narrow, association with contested cities and 'conventional' wars. The case of Gaza, in this sense, presents a neo-colonial articulation of urbicide as a temporally unbounded strategy of disabling through repeated spatial maiming (Puar, 2017). Spatial ruination by waged war is not the main and sufficient means of this articulation of urbicide; rather, siege and denied rehabilitation are its pivotal components.

To elaborate, the concept of urbicide has a rather long history. Although it originated in relation to urban renewal projects in the U.S. in the 1960s, it gained traction in academic circles in the 1990s, when it was effectively deployed to characterise the peculiarity of the Bosnian war (for an overview of the genealogy of the notion of urbicide, see Fregonese, 2020). In subsequent years, scholars mobilized it to account for other armed struggles in the post-Cold War era (see, for instance, Graham, 2004a). Urbicide has referred generally to a "peculiar formation of purposive violence where urbanity is the strategic object of violence" (Campbell, Graham, & Monk, 2007). Scholars, though, have offered varied interpretations. One of the more widespread understandings has been proposed by Martin Coward, according to whom urbicide is "the destruction of buildings not for what they individually represent (military target, cultural heritage, conceptual metaphor) but as that which is the condition of possibility of heterogeneous existence" (Coward, 2009, p. 39). In contrast to approaches that concentrate on the relationship between military violence, terror and the city (e.g. Graham, 2004b), Coward's conceptualization of urbicide looks beyond the phase of military confrontation and extends to periods of peace. The destructive phase of the war is thus read as part and parcel of an overall reorganization of urban spatiality which continues after waged conflict by means of surgical demolitions and strategic reconstructions (Fregonese, 2020). Reflecting its genealogical connections to scholarship on contested cities and ethno-nationalistic conflict, this approach has viewed the ultimate goal of urbicide as the replacement of heterogeneity with homogeneity (Coward, 2009). This conceptualization has therefore been

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fruitfully mobilized in the analysis of contested cities, including Mostar and Sarajevo following the collapse of Yugoslavia, Beirut during the Lebanese civil war (Fregonese, 2020), and East Jerusalem following military occupation by Israel in 1967 (Chiodelli, 2017).

In Gaza, however, the situation might be considered different. We are not talking about a contested urban area, but a territory seen by the Israeli authorities as a wild and dangerous space where the objective is not conquest or homogenisation, but population subjugation (Mbembe, 2008). Israel's approach to the Strip is much more in line with a neo-colonial understanding of urbicide, which must be read as "a particular set of strategies of destroying specific social and physical aspects of urban settlement [...] that maximizes the capacity of occupying forces to survey, surround and control occupied lands and populations" (Kipfer & Goonewardena, 2007, n.p.). In Gaza, the spatial reconfiguration by the victors highlighted in Coward's reading of urbicide translates into permanent *spatial disabling through repeated maiming* (Puar, 2017), enacted between periods of active conflict through the denial of the possibility of physical rehabilitation. This last point is fundamental to understanding the peculiarity of Gaza's urbicide, which rests on the structural relationship between its two constitutive moments: siege and destructive attack. In other cases of urbicide, destruction has been followed by reconstruction; military attack, without a state of siege, has not necessarily turned into necropolitical space annihilation (Mbembe, 2019). In these cases, reconstruction has often been complicated, arduous and slow, but some kind of urbanity nevertheless has been allowed to spring up again, along with hope for a slow rebirth. The state of siege, in contrast, prevents de facto any reconstruction.

The population and the institutions of the Strip do not have the material or economic resources needed for reconstruction. Israel, in fact, controls, filters and limits everything that can enter the Strip. This includes construction materials, which are blocked because, according to Israeli authorities, they could be used for war purposes as well. How can tens of thousands of buildings be repaired or rebuilt if there is a permanent shortage of lumber, steel, and cement? The inhabitants of the Gaza Strip have sometimes made up for this with creativity, for example, by extracting building materials from the rubble. They have also used controversial tunnels to get a substantial amount of building materials into the Strip (Barakat, Milton, & Elkahlout, 2020). However, it is evident that these solutions cannot support a systematic and timely reconstruction process. Thus, each bombing adds new rubble to what has not yet been rebuilt, in a spiral of infrastructural annihilation through which the built environment is not just destroyed, but properly killed (Boano, 2011).

If reading the concept of urbicide through the lens of the events in the Gaza Strip offers a valuably expanded conceptualization of the notion of urbicide, reading Gaza through the lens of urbicide is politically necessary for two reasons. The first – and most obvious – is that it allows the destruction of the urban fabric of the Strip to be read not as collateral damage, but as an objective in and of itself. This gives sense to the enormity of the ruination wrought by the Israeli bombardments. Attacks on civil and economic infrastructures – presented in Israeli public discourse as accidental effects of the urban nature of the conflict – are revealed to be a constitutive element of the neo-colonial strategy of socio-spatial domination through subjugation – as "reprisals and collective punishment", both of which constitute war crimes (United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, 2009).

The second reason is that the notion of urbicide – read as a thorough concatenation of siege, military destruction and impossible rehabilitation – allows us to unify, in ontological, material and narrative terms, what has been happening in Gaza since June 2007. If the sporadic nature of the waged war is a powerful weapon of public obfuscation, then exposing the unitary logic guiding Israeli policy is politically and historically necessary to account for the enormity of the crime that is being committed. In the light of this unity, the Gaza fight turns out to be not a series of periodic armed clashes, but a long-running and purposeful policy of violent neo-colonialism – the longest-lasting war of our era.

Therefore, its consequences cannot be accounted for only by counting the dead during the active war periods, but, rather, must also take into consideration the enduring impacts (social, psychological, health, ecologic, economic) of this permanent warfare on the population. To account for this, Puar (2017) convincingly mobilises the concept of *maiming*, whose "end goal is the dual production of permanent disability via the infliction of harm and the attrition of the life support systems that might allow populations to heal from this harm" (p. 143). The maiming of the built environment serves to "stunt or decay the able-bodied into debilitation through the control of calories, water, electricity, health care supplies, and fuel" (ibid. p. 144).

To summarize, mobilizing the concept of urbicide allows a clearer understanding of the situation in the Gaza Strip (thus eluding Israeli strategies of public obfuscation); at the same time, it encourages a rearticulation of the notion of urbicide that highlights neo-colonial socio-spatial subjugation through the cyclical assemblage of siege, military destruction, and denied rehabilitation. While such an articulation of urbicide is most obvious today in the Gaza Strip, domination by siege and episodic military violence is a possibility within all heavily policed, neo-colonial regimes, including those that exist in refugee camps (Brankamp, 2019; Ramadan, 2013). The case of Gaza urges us to give attention not only to the spectacle of destruction from bombs and missiles, but also to the unspectacular, everyday violence of isolation, starvation, and disabling – that is, the neglected, banal violence of neo-colonial urbicide.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

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