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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Karim Natour

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"Architecture is a weapon used to commit genocide"

Settler colonialism in Palestine: On the destruction of the people's livelihoods by the Israeli army. A conversation with Eyal Weizman



Background: Destruction in numbers

Israeli warfare in the densely populated Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, has almost completely destroyed the living conditions of its just over two million residents. According to a February 2025 report in *Time* magazine, around 90 percent of the population has been displaced since the outbreak of the war. More than 92 percent of all housing units and nearly all school buildings have been damaged or completely destroyed. Likewise, more than 84 percent of health facilities. Over 48,200 Palestinians have been killed so far – two percent of the pre-war population – at least half of them minors and women. A January 2025 study in the medical journal *The Lancet* estimates that the official death toll for the first nine months of the war is even higher. The authors believe that by October 2024, the death toll will have exceeded 70,000. Human Rights Watch stated that by the end of August 2024, the Israeli military had destroyed at least 31 of 54 water reservoirs. At one point, over 96 percent of drinking water was unfit for consumption, and almost the entire population was affected by

food insecurity due to the blockade of aid deliveries and the destruction of fields. An investigation by the Qatari broadcaster *Al Jazeera* found that Israel systematically denied aid and water to the starving people in the Gaza Strip. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned last week that the shutdown of the main desalination and water treatment plant increased the risk of sewage flooding in civilian areas. In early March 2025, Israel cut off power to the desalination plant in the southern Gaza Strip. According to the United Nations, the Israeli military's actions have left behind around 50 million tons of rubble and debris since October 2023. According to the Palestinian Authority for Environmental Quality, over 85,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the Gaza Strip during this period. This is roughly three times the amount dropped on Dresden, Hamburg, and London combined during World War II. Dozens of mosques and entire streets were blown up. The cost of reconstruction is currently estimated at around \$53 billion. Civilian infrastructure in the West Bank has also been targeted since the outbreak of the war. In cities such as Jenin, Tulkarm, and Nablus, roads, water pipes, sewage systems, and residential buildings have been damaged or completely destroyed. (kan)

Eyal Weizman is an Israeli-born British architect and director of the research agencies Forensic Architecture in London and Forensis in Berlin.

You're an architect. Why did you speak on a panel with the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Francesca Albanese, in Berlin in February?

First of all, I didn't invite myself. I'm close friends with Francesca, and we often work together. The research organization I lead, Forensic Architecture, is supporting the South African legal team in The Hague in connection with South Africa's genocide lawsuit against Israel. At the event in February, I was asked to present an evidence-based legal analysis of the Israeli genocide in Gaza. The UN Special Rapporteur and I are both strong advocates of international law. Respect for international law should be a mainstream issue. In Germany, however, we are portrayed as hateful or radical, when all we are doing is calling for an end to the atrocities, the current genocide, and the preceding apartheid and occupation.

You mentioned the organization Forensic Architecture, which you founded in London in 2010. What do you research and how do you go about it?

There is a history to October 7th. I mean the expulsion and dehumanization of the Palestinians, the colonization of the land, which has been going on for decades. The war, which quickly degenerated into genocide after October 7th, has a significant spatial dimension—environmental destruction is one of the most important aspects for proving

genocide. Article II(c) of the UN Genocide Convention states that the creation of conditions of life that lead to the destruction of a people constitutes genocide.

Can you explain this in more detail?

These living conditions include buildings, hospitals, schools, and other civilian infrastructure that holds society together. These have been systematically razed in the Gaza Strip. This also includes the destruction of agriculture and food security. The same applies to the healthcare system, which has been systematically attacked. The use of architecture as a weapon—the transformation of the environment—has become a means of genocide. Thus, the crimes can also be found in architecture.

Israel's actions in the densely populated Gaza Strip have drawn international criticism. How do you examine "architecture as a weapon," as you put it?

My colleague Nour Abuzaid, a Palestinian from the Gaza Strip, told me something very important at the beginning of the war: When people film and upload it, they want it to be seen. It is our duty not to look away. At Forensic Architecture, we also watch the videos so that others don't have to – they are too traumatizing. Every video is a testimony from the people on the ground. We look for patterns in the tens of thousands of snippets. So this is not the same approach we took in Germany with the Hanau attack or the NSU (National Socialist Underground). In Gaza, it's not about who committed a crime – because that's obvious. We are interested in whether systematic connections can be identified between different atrocities. Our guiding question is: Does the picture emerge that amounts to genocide?

What is your answer?

We see that Israel's goal is not the destruction of a specific area, but the complete annihilation of everything necessary for life. Another example: orchards and fields are being attacked, while at the same time aid shipments are being targeted – as in the "flour massacre" in February 2024. We have now recorded dozens of similar incidents. The destruction of agriculture exacerbates the impact of the already limited aid.

In an *Al Jazeera* documentary about the "architecture of occupation," you describe architecture as "slow violence." What do you mean by that?

My work began by mapping Israeli settlement policy in the context of the colonization of the West Bank. I showed how Israeli planners created a space on the drawing board that would allow the Jewish community to acquire land and water and settle in the best areas. To achieve this, the Palestinian territories must steadily shrink. Residents are displaced piece by piece. For generations, Palestinian towns, villages, fields, and landscapes have been systematically destroyed, people expelled, and settlements built on the ruins—exclusively for Jews. History

becomes visible through architectural changes. What we are seeing in Gaza is simply the acceleration of the creeping architectural violence that has always existed.

So, in addition to the war in the Gaza Strip, the settlements in the West Bank are the main focus of your analysis. How does the situation differ from the area within Israel's official borders?

In my first book, I focused on the history of the architecture of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. Since the early 20th century, even before the founding of the state, Zionist settlements with defensive towers and walls were built in Palestinian-inhabited areas. Wherever these towering settlements were built, the area around them was systematically ethnically cleansed. Later, during the Nakba (the expulsion of Palestinians from 1948 onwards, JW), the systematic destruction of towns and villages went hand in hand with new construction projects. Israeli planners built kibbutzim on stolen Palestinian land, primarily in the Gaza Strip. This is relevant to the current situation: The settlements attacked on October 7 are effectively the first line of defense in the siege of the Gaza Strip. They are an artificial structure, a consequence of the Nakba. Previously, the Gaza Strip was connected to Arab cities such as Hebron (Al-Khalil, jW) and Beersheba. After the end of the war in 1948, the Egyptian army remained stationed along the route between Rafah and Gaza. Israel isolated the area. The siege, therefore, did not begin in the last two decades. It was originally built by civilian kibbutzim and their fields, which formed the border. The so-called organic wall, which was built to imprison over 200,000 Palestinian refugees.

Is architecture as an element of control in Palestine/Israel different from other colonial situations?

Every child is different, but they come from the same family. For example, we also analyze the German genocide at the beginning of the 20th century in what is now Namibia. The German settlements and the way the environment was altered in the Herero and Nama areas bear similarities to Palestine. The German colonial rulers at that time attempted to transform the supposed desert into a "flourishing landscape." This is the same "living space policy" as Zionism. This is how you proceed when you try to replace one population with another.

You are an Israeli citizen. How is your work received in your home country?

I was always part of the binational resistance against Israeli apartheid. There was always a small anti-colonial movement in Israel. I had and still have friends, both Jewish and Arab, who fought together for justice and freedom in Palestine. For me, liberating Palestine also means freeing us from the role of oppressors. You know, I don't do this work out of hatred. I do it out of love for what could be.

And what could that be?

I believe that a shared democratic state is the only just solution and, in a sense, even inevitable. Equal rights for all. The abolition of Jewish-Israeli domination. I was born in Haifa, my mother in Germany, her grandfather in Poland. But neither Poland nor Germany is my homeland. I am a child of this country.

Are you being attacked because of your work?

There are many people who are very angry about what we are doing. I won't say anything more about that.