A brief history of the term 'Urbicide' premium

Activists say Israel's attack on hospitals, bakeries and schools counts as urbicide — a premeditated destruction of cities.

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SAUMYA KALIA

group Hamas, in southern Gaza City on November 26, 2023. | Photo Credit: Reuters Recent reports warned of a new military tactic: that Israel may flood the intricate network of tunnels in Gaza with seawater, in a purported attempt to draw Hamas operatives out of

Residential buildings, destroyed in Israeli strikes during the conflict, lie in ruin, amid a temporary truce between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist

their hideouts. The plan envisages five large water pumps positioned near the al-Shati refugee camps, pumping thousands of cubic meters of water per hour, for weeks on end. Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi in a report confirmed this tactic, saying they would do whatever it takes to "destroy this infrastructure," as the Israeli Defence Forces expand their offensive towards southern Gaza. This strategy, in the long term, could destroy groundwater and aquifers and the impact could "last for several generations," an academic told *The Times of Israel.* For this generation, this offensive would render water contaminated and undrinkable — in a region where more than 70% of people are drinking water that is salinated and polluted. The scene described would fit perfectly with writer Christian Salmon's description of his 2002 travels from Ramallah to Gaza and Rafah. Documenting ruined landscapes, lacerated hills and "scenes of destruction," he wrote: "What is most striking in Palestine

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now is the violence wrought against the land... Houses are destroyed, olive trees uprooted, orange groves laid waste . . . " Sewers, schools, roads, houses, a forensic laboratory, the Voice of Palestine radio station. "Who is to believe that these were terrorist institutions?" he later wrote in a blog. "Geography, it is said, determines war. In Palestine, it is war that has achieved the upper hand over geography." History finds abundant examples of architecture being weaponised in wars, a tactical approach scholars have come to refer to as "urbicide." When public services are bombed and roads disfigured by men and machinery, it may be described as urbicide, an act of

pulverizes and paralyses cities, "transforming all the points within the area into a minefield, every individual into a living target or a human bomb." The roots of 'urbicide' The etymology gives the meaning away: Urbicide is Latin for 'city killing', *urbs* translating to city and occido 'to kill'. What counts as a 'city'? Everyday technics, spaces and infrastructures of life, writers note. Think supermarkets, metro trains, water systems, computer networks, electricity grids, food systems, medical systems, education institutes,

ritualised, premeditated violence on built infrastructures. Violence, Mr. Salmon wrote,

and research grids. Any built entity that "may be easily assaulted and turned into agents either of instantaneous terror or debilitating demodernisation."

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Among the first usages of the term was in June 1963, when science fiction author Michael

Bogdanović, affected by the siege of Sarajevo, understood urbicide as the "ritualised

and annihilates memories, identities and cultures woven into a city's fabric.

murder of cities," which goes beyond the simple objective of physically destroying cities,

Moorcock, in *Dead God's Homecoming*, used 'urbicide' to describe the attack in the fictional bounds of Sequa. It wasn't until the late 1980s that scholars like Marshall Berman and Bogdan Bogdanović coined the word "urbicide" to account for the widespread destruction of Balkan towns during the Yugoslavic wars between 1992 and 1996. Mr.

"For at least 20 years, OPT [occupied Palestinian territory] has been subjected to the destruction of hospitals, schools, electric transformers, water tanks, and cultural institutions, not to mention trees, fruit orchards, agricultural lands. This is all urbicide." Malini Ranganathan, a scholar of urban geography

Up until then, 'genocide' existed as a framework in international conventions to articulate

the deliberate killing of people belonging to a particular ethnic group. The term, however,

"From its earliest use in urban studies, urbicide has been associated with Palestine," says

Professor Malini Ranganathan, a scholar of urban geography and an associate professor at American University. The early 2000s marked a turning point for the term's popularity when scholar Steven Graham used "urbicide" in a 2003 article in the context of Israel-

government, triggering mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians.

did not account for tactical violence aimed beyond human bodies.

meters of area in the Jenin Refugee Camp, was the quintessential expression of "urbicide." Some scholars also reasoned that the events leading up to the *Nakba* were an act of urbicide too.Between 1947 and 1948, Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods were strategically emptied, blown up, and bulldozed, and land was confiscated by the Israeli

of Caterpillar D9 bulldozers to demolish Palestinian homes, strewn across 40,000 sq.

Palestine relations. Mr. Graham argued that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)'s deployment

Once popularised, the concept was applied by scholars retrospectively in wars, conflicts and attacks. To the siege of Troy, the systemic destruction of 65 Japanese cities by American military bombers during World War II, acres of lower Manhattan reduced to rubble after the 9/11 bombings on the World Trade Center, buildings demolished in Kabul and Aleppo, museums and universities in Ukraine's Kharkiv targeted by Russian forces. Relatedly, 'domicide,' or the systematic attack on the right to safe shelter, is recognised as

encompassing not just homes, but also infrastructure, parks, public spirit, democracy, and culture. Why cities? The motivations to attack the built environment are both logistical and ideological. If people make cities, cities make people. "The city is a repository of people's memories

and past, and is also the receptacle of cultural traditions and values," author and heritage

consultant Robert Bevan argued in *The Destruction of Memory*. Identity is designed into

buildings and structures, transforming them into "containers of meaning and history."

The Stari Most bridge in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, connected the west

and the east banks of the old town on the Neretva River, and stood as a symbol of Bosnian

society and cultural communities. It collapsed as a result of continuous shelling in 1993

during the Croat-Bosniak War — despite holding "little to no strategic value."

joined communities it had come to embody," Mr. Bevan noted.

a crime against humanity in international law, but urbicide is not. The two diverge in

application after a point, explains Professor Ranganathan. Urbicide is ideologically vaster,

Urbicide is not limited to blood and battlefields; it applies to urban restructuring and gentrification too, researchers like Mr. Berman and Ada Lousie Huxtable have argued. Modernisation and the loss of public spaces were akin to "hacking your way through with

a meat axe," Mr. Berman wrote, leaving hundreds of people dispossessed. To some, the

scale of devastation caused by gentrification made New York's Bronx area comparable to

"The attack on the bridge was an attack on the very concept of multi-ethnicity and the co-

guerrilla wars unfolding in distant Berlin and Beirut. Also Read | U.N. chief uses rare power to warn Security Council of impending 'humanitarian catastrophe' in Gaza Key to the definition of urbicideis that the attack keeps the region in a condition of perpetual devastation. It accounts not only for the scale of destruction, but also for the impossibility of reconstructing what has been destroyed. Beyond identities and

imagination, cities also nourish daily human life, allowing the production of knowledge,

science, arts; the mobility of trade; and the creation of wealth. Attacks on water systems,

schools or hospitals make it so that war is experienced by nation's civilians on a daily

basis; urbicide becomes a perpetual offence, keeping people trapped in a state of human

suffering and collective trauma. "The end goal of urbicide is not just ethnic cleansing of a

current population, but the elimination of even the future prospects of that population,"

explains Prof. Ranganathan. "Without the infrastructure to sustain life and social reproduction (schools, hospitals, etc), the crime of ethnic cleansing becomes necessarily multi-generational."

Damaging built infrastructures is brutal, scholars argue, because reconstruction is

expensive, prolonged and sometimes never happens. The Gaza Strip, under blockade for

years, lacks the economic resources to promote reconstruction, relying completely on

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How does urbicide happen?

international humanitarian aid that has dwindled over the years. But "each bombing adds new rubble to what had not yet been rebuilt," noted Francesco Chiodelli, an associate professor or urban and legal geography, adding that it creates "a spiral of increasing annihilation of urban space." A recent +972 magazine investigation found Israel military officials in their latest assault on Gaza are bombing "power targets" (matarot otzem) such as high-rise buildings and hospitals that are not distinctly military in nature. Moreover, Gaza has one of the world's highest densities of solar rooftop installations, but 17 out of the 29 systems have either been destroyed or damaged, which damage experts say throws a wrench in its plans to

Mr. Berman famously noted that in building cities, people attempt a kind of collective

"process of total annihilation", says Prof. Ranganathan. It erases memory, eliminating

"population from being able to repair and regenerate." Architecture, conversely, increases

the possibility of recollection. A witness who lived through the Assad regime in Syria was

given measurements of a door and asked to create a picture of it (living through those

times) — he was able to recall the forms of torture that were "otherwise inaccessible,"

immortality — individuals may die, but the city lives on. Urbicide in that sense is a

knowledge, photographs, archives, stored and documented histories, preventing a

Israeli architect Eyal Weizman said in an interview. Urbicide is understood not only in the geographical context of two nations or one region, Prof. Ranganathan adds, "the urban becomes a theatre and the medium of warfare, but in a war that has geopolitical connotations." It is a form of "negative architecture," an architecture that has been actively transformed and used as a means of destruction. Careers are built on this: Marc Garlasco in 2003 was named the 'Chief of High-Value Targeting' in the Pentagon. His mission, during the second Gulf War, was to design attacks on buildings, in order to assassinate former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and

members of his family. Mr. Garlasco later resigned and now works with Human Rights

A 'fast urbicide' is immediate and instant: aerial bombing of cities, drone strikes,

detonation of built infrastructure, any and all forms of military operations performed in

Slow urbicide, on the contrary, is a "chronic condition of emerging harm...where both space and time are weaponised," scholar Dorota Golańska noted in a 2022 paper that looked at the 'radical displacement' caused by Israel's colonisation of the West Bank. Slow urbicide is a "gradual destruction" that is associated with "development" and "innocent signs of modernisation" rather than destruction — bureaucratic neglect, imposing blockades, and polluting natural resources. Prof. Ranganathan gives an example, of Israeli settlements built atop hilltops in order to surveil Palestinian settlements constructed at lower elevations. Palestinians don't have

access to the same roads as Israelis: certain roads crisscross the West Bank and connect

manufacturing of a highly segregated, fragmented, and interrupted urban landscape," she

only Israeli settlements. "This, too, is a form of urbicide to me because it is a deliberate

The instruments of urbicide thus are aplenty: renaming a city); monopolising public

stands out, too, —Prof. Ranganathan called it a "quintessential symbol of urbicide."

space; or neglecting the development of public infrastructures. The usage of bulldozers

"Around the world, the bulldozer is a symbol of state terror, especially for the urban poor,

but also marginalized groups. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party proudly advances a

'bulldozer raj' to eliminate, intimidate, and silence Muslim dissidents and the poor," she says. Israel's Ariel Sharon said the bulldozing of Jenin refugee camps in 2002 was essential to weeding out terrorist infrastructure. Mr. Sharon (he was nicknamed the 'Bulldozer') has a long and murky association with using bulldozers as a weapon of war. While explaining the attack on Palestinians who were trying to find residence in new Jewish settlements around 2001, he said: "I would eliminate the first row of houses in Beit Jela...[Arabs] are

not impressed by helicopters and missiles. For them, there is nothing more important

to level the entire village with bulldozers, row after row."

of killing that democratic "civitas,", "citizen" or "civic".

scorches. War dismembers. War ruins."

than their house. So, under me, you will not see a child shot next to his father. It is better

This makes urbicide a process unleashed on two fronts. Architecture is used as a weapon

destroyed to erode democracy and resilience. If the "city" is supposed to be a space of the

democratic and inclusive "civitas" or "civic", Prof. Ranganathan adds that urbicide is a way

to murder a civilian population; the organisation and cultural aspects of a city are

"It is not just space or buildings that are interrupted or killed, but the very notion of democracy, the demos, the civic/civitas/citizenship," she highlights.

"To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off

buildings are almost as eloquent as body parts... This is what

war does. War tears, war rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War

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