Filistin Araştırmaları Dergisi
Bulletin of Palestine Studies
e-ISSN: 2587-1862

Kış/Winter 18, 2025, 397-417
Makale Türü / Type of Article: Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article
Gönderim/Submitted: 11.07.2025, Kabul/Accepted: 22.12.2025, Yayın/Published: 31.12.2025
DOI: http://doi.org/10.34230/fiad.1740210

Urbicide in Israel's War on Gaza: Architecture of Erasure and the Unmaking of Urban Life (2023–2025)

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of urbicide—defined as the systematic destruction of urban environments—in Israel's military strategy during the war on Gaza from 2023 to 2025. It explores how the erasure of infrastructure, housing, and essential services served not only as a means of military incapacitation but as a deliberate strategy to dismantle Gaza as a space of urban life, memory, and sovereignty. The scope of the research moves beyond physical damage to examine the strategic, political, and symbolic implications of urbicide within the broader settler-colonial framework. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed empirical and theoretical approach, combining: satellite imagery analysis and damage assessment reports (UNOSAT, UNDP, OCHA) to map patterns of destruction; quantitative data from the World Bank, FAO, and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) to assess demographic and infrastructural impacts; and theoretical insights from critical urban studies, settler-colonial theory, and postcolonial geography. Findings reveal that over 70% of Gaza's built environment has been destroyed or rendered non-functional, with entire districts rendered uninhabitable. The unmaking of urban life is shown to be not collateral, but integral to a strategic logic aimed at disabling civic infrastructure, displacing populations, and erasing the viability of future sovereignty. Yet, the study also identifies countercurrents of symbolic and spatial resistance, as civil society, local actors, and communities reconstitute forms of endurance and political meaning from within the ruins. The study concludes that urbicide is a structural tool of domination in settler-colonial warfare, and calls for further research on post-urbicidal urban recovery, the politics of memory, and spatial justice in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Palestine, Settler colonialism, Urban warfare, Gaza Strip, Urbicide.

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Alıntı/Citation: Benguita, Mourad. "Urbicide in Israel's War on Gaza: Architecture of Erasure and the Unmaking of Urban Life (2023–2025)." *Filistin Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 18 (2025): 397-417. http://doi.org/10.34230/fiad.1740210.

İsrail'in Gazze Savaşında Kent Kırımı: Yok Etme Mimarisi ve Kentsel Yaşamın Çözülüşü (2023–2025)

Özet

Bu çalışma, İsrail'in 2023–2025 yılları arasındaki Gazze savaşı sırasında izlediği askeri stratejide kent kırımının (urbicide)—şehirsel çevrelerin sistematik olarak yok edilmesinin—rolünü incelemektedir. Altyapının, konutların ve temel hizmetlerin yok edilmesinin yalnızca askeri etkisizleştirme amacı taşımadığı; aynı zamanda Gazze'nin kentsel yaşam, hafıza ve egemenlik mekanı olarak bilinçli bir şekilde çözülmesini hedefleyen bir strateji olarak kullanıldığı ortaya konmaktadır. Araştırmanın kapsamı yalnızca fiziksel tahribatla sınırlı kalmayıp, kent kırımının sömürgeci yerleşimci yapı içerisindeki stratejik, siyasal ve sembolik boyutlarını da analiz etmektedir. Yöntem olarak çalışma, karma bir kuramsal ve ampirik yaklaşımı benimsemekte; yıkım örüntülerini haritalamak için uydu görüntüleri ve hasar değerlendirme raporlarını (UNOSAT, UNDP, OCHA), demografik ve altyapısal etkileri değerlendirmek için Dünya Bankası, FAO ve Filistin Merkez İstatistik Bürosu (PCBS) gibi kurumlardan nicel verileri ve kuramsal çerçeve olarak eleştirel kent çalışmaları, yerleşimci sömürgecilik teorisi ve postkolonyal coğrafyadan kavramsal katkıları kullanmaktadır. Bulgular, Gazze'nin yapı stokunun %70'inden fazlasının yok edildiğini veya işlevsiz hale getirildiğini; bazı bölgelerin tamamen yaşanamaz duruma geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Kentsel yaşamın çözülüşünün tesadüfi değil; sivil altyapının çökertilmesi, nüfusun yerinden edilmesi ve gelecekteki egemenliğin imkânsızlaştırılmasına yönelik stratejik bir mantığın parçası olduğu gösterilmektedir. Bununla birlikte çalışma, harabeler arasında ortaya çıkan sembolik ve mekânsal direniş biçimlerini; sivil toplumun, yerel aktörlerin ve toplulukların dayanışma ve siyasal anlamı yeniden üretme çabalarını da ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, kent kırımını yerleşimci-sömürgeci savaş biçiminin yapısal bir tahakküm aracı olarak tanımlamakta ve kent-sonrası toparlanma süreçleri, hafıza politikaları ve mekânsal adalet gibi konularda ileri araştırmalar yapılması çağrısında bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Filistin, Yerleşimci sömürgecilik, Kentsel savaş, Gazze Şeridi, Kent kırımı.

Introduction

In contemporary warfare, cities have increasingly become not only battlegrounds but also primary targets of destruction. The phenomenon of urbicide—the deliberate killing of the city as a living space—has emerged as a defining feature of asymmetric and settler-colonial conflicts. This study explores the aftermath of urbicide in the Gaza Strip during the 2023–2025 Israeli military campaign, analyzing how the targeted destruction of urban infrastructure, mass displacement, and symbolic erasure have transformed Gaza's spatial, political, and demographic realities.

The phenomenon of urbicide in Gaza cannot be separated from its deeper historical and colonial trajectories. Since the 1948 Nakba, spatial control, forced displacement, and infrastructural violence have formed central pillars of Israel's settler-colonial project. Gaza, in particular, has been subject to cycles of siege, bombardment, and isolation that transform the city from a space of life into a target of systematic containment and unmaking. The war of October 2023, however, introduced new scales and intensities of destruction—dismantling not only homes and hospitals, but also the possibility of urban continuity, reconstruction, and return. This raises the central research question: How does Israel's war strategy in Gaza between 2023 and 2025 employ urbicide as a structural tool to unmake

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urban life, suppress resistance, and reshape the spatial conditions of sovereignty and survival?

A growing body of literature addresses urbicide[1], settler-colonialism[2], and Gaza's spatial politics.[3] In addition, Turkish scholarship has contributed significantly to the conceptual and comparative understanding of urbicide. Studies such as Karasu[4] and Yılmaz and Şahin[5] emphasize that urbicide represents not only physical destruction but also a form of spatial genocide targeting the memory, identity, and collective continuity of urban life. These analyses, linking the cases of Bosnia and Palestine, demonstrate how the annihilation of cities operates as a political project of erasure and domination. However, few studies have systematically connected urbicide in Gaza to the broader logics of political elimination, demographic neutralization, and symbolic warfare. This study advances an original argument: that urbicide in Gaza functions not merely as a military tactic but as a multi-layered strategy of political subjugation and urban unmaking, which paradoxically generates new modalities of resistance, both material and symbolic.

Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed empirical and theoretical approach, combining:

- satellite imagery analysis and damage assessment reports (UNOSAT, UNDP, OCHA) to map patterns of destruction;
- quantitative data from institutions such as the World Bank, FAO, and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) to assess demographic and infrastructural impacts;
- theoretical insights from critical urban studies, settler-colonial theory, and postcolonial geography.

The study does not seek to catalogue destruction as isolated data but to interpret it as part of a coherent strategic logic. By focusing on three interrelated axes—the Spatial Nakba, the rendering of Gaza as uninhabitable, and Gaza's symbolic reconstitution as a site of resistance—this research contributes to rethinking urbicide not only as a form of violence but also as a battleground of memory, identity, and political futurity.

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1 Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010); Martin Coward, *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (London: Routledge, 2009).

2 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

3 Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007); Rafeef Ziadah et al., "Disruptive Geographies and the War on Gaza: Infrastructure and Global Solidarity," *Geopolitics*, published online June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2510319.

4 Mithat A. Karasu, "Bir Kentin Ölümü: Kentkırım (Bosna-Hersek Örneği)," *Çağdaş Yerel Yönetimler* 17, no. 3 (July 2008): 51–64.

5 Fırat Harun Yılmaz and Ali Şahin, "Kentsel Yıkımın Bosna ve Filistin Örnekleri Üzerinden Kentkırım Kapsamında Değerlendirilmesi," *Sosyal Bilimler Meslek Yüksekokulu Dergisi* 21, no. 1 (Nisan 2018).

1. Theoretical Foundations of Urbicide and Spatial Warfare

In contemporary warfare—particularly in asymmetrical and settler-colonial contexts—the city is no longer a passive backdrop for conflict, but a central object of strategic targeting. The dense, interconnected, and symbolically charged nature of urban space renders it a site of both operational significance and ideological anxiety. Increasingly, the aim is not to control cities but to dismantle their capacity to function socially, politically, and materially. This shift calls for conceptual tools that foreground the urban as a target of systemic violence—most notably the notion of urbicide, the deliberate killing of the city.

Gaza, between 2023 and 2025, constitutes one of the most urgent and paradigmatic cases of urbicide in contemporary warfare. The large-scale destruction of homes, schools, hospitals, universities, and vital infrastructure has far surpassed the threshold of military necessity, suggesting a structural logic designed to eliminate the viability of urban life itself. This chapter mobilizes a critical theoretical framework that includes urbicide, necropolitics, settler colonialism, critical geopolitics, and decolonial thought to grasp the deeper logics of such destruction.

1.1. Defining Urbicide: From Sarajevo Onwards

The concept of urbicide emerged prominently during the 1990s, particularly in reference to the siege of Sarajevo in the Bosnian War. Sarajevo was not merely a battlefield; it was the object of a concerted campaign to erase its physical structures, cultural plurality, and symbolic centrality. [6] This marked a shift in the understanding of war: cities were no longer just locations of conflict—they were themselves targets of ideological and structural violence. Recent works in critical urban studies have highlighted that urbicide entails the systematic dismantling of the social and symbolic networks that sustain collective life. It can be understood as the spatial embodiment of genocidal intent, where the annihilation of culture and collective identity is materialized through the destruction of architecture, archives, and urban memory—transforming physical ruin into an instrument of historical erasure.[7]

Subsequent analyses have shown that such destruction operates as a spatial manifestation of genocidal violence—the translation of cultural extermination into architectural form. In this sense, urbicide materializes political annihilation in space, transforming the city into both evidence and instrument of domination, where ruins become a language of power and erasure.[8]

Martin Coward, one of the foundational theorists of urbicide, argues that the urban fabric—its heterogeneity, density, and openness—is inherently threatening to projects of ethnic homogenization or authoritarian order. Cities, in his view, embody radical plurality

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[6] Martin Coward, *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (London: Routledge, 2009), 8.

[7] Esra Banu Sipahi and Rabia Çakar, "Soykırımın Mekândaki İz Düşümü Olarak Kentkırım Anlatıları: Bosna Hersek Örneği Üzerinden Belgesel Film Analizi," *İnsan ve Toplum: The Journal of Humanity and Society* 13, no. 1 (2023): 162–163.

[8] Fırat Harun Yılmaz and Ali Şahin, "Kentsel Yıkımın Bosna ve Filistin Örnekleri Üzerinden Kentkırım Kapsamında Değerlendirilmesi," *Sosyal Bilimler Meslek Yüksekokulu Dergisi* 21, no. 1 (April 2018), 94.

and cohabitation.[9] Their destruction, therefore, constitutes ontological violence: not just the demolition of buildings but the annihilation of the very conditions that make urban life possible—difference, encounter, and memory.[10] Urbicide, thus, becomes a response to the symbolic and political autonomy of urban space.

This redefinition of warfare positions the city as both a symbolic and material actor in political life. Urbicide is not accidental, nor is it merely collateral—it is intentional and systematic. It targets the city precisely because of what it represents: cosmopolitanism, civic resistance, and spatial cohesion.[11] Within this framework, urban destruction becomes a performative act of sovereign power, one that seeks not only to devastate physical structures but to reconfigure the imaginaries and possibilities attached to them.

Moreover, urbicide disrupts traditional legal distinctions between civilian and military targets. In many contemporary conflicts, infrastructure, population centers, and resistance become entangled. The result is a mode of violence that seeks to obliterate the city as a space of life, governance, and political potential. Urbicide, in this sense, names a modality of structural elimination deeply embedded in broader regimes of domination, whether nationalist, colonial, or imperial.[12]

While genocide and urbicide often intersect in both intention and effect, they operate on distinct yet complementary registers of violence. Genocide seeks to annihilate a people as a biological and social entity, erasing their communal existence and continuity. [13] Urbicide, on the other hand, targets the spatial and material foundations that enable that existence—destroying the architecture, infrastructure, and urban memory that sustain collective life. In this sense, urbicide functions as the spatial embodiment of genocide, translating demographic annihilation into the language of material and symbolic destruction. [14]

In the case of Gaza, these two crimes converge in a double annihilation—the systematic extermination of human life and the deliberate eradication of the urban habitat. The distinction between them is crucial not to fragment the violence but to understand its layered structure: one aimed at eliminating people, the other at preventing their spatial return and historical continuity.

1.2. Urbicide as Infrastructure Warfare

While early discussions of urbicide focused on symbolic and existential dimensions, Stephen Graham has extended the concept through the lens of military urbanism, which foregrounds the targeting of the infrastructures that sustain urban life.Water systems, electricity grids, sanitation networks, hospitals, and communications—the so-called

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9 Coward, Urbicide, 25.
10 Coward, Urbicide, 31.
11 Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010), 156–159
12 Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 210.
13 Fırat Harun Yılmaz and Ali Şahin, "Kentsel Yıkımın Bosna ve Filistin Örnekleri Üzerinden Kentkırım Kapsamında Değerlendirilmesi," 97.
14 Mithat A. Karasu, "Bir Kentin Ölümü: Kentkırım (Bosna-Hersek Örneği)," *Çağdaş Yerel Yönetimler* 17, no. 3 (July 2008): 58–59

"urban metabolism"—are increasingly subjected to deliberate destruction.[15] These systems are not neutral; they enable urban life, and their disruption functions as a calculated means of dismantling that life.

In asymmetrical warfare, infrastructure is often reimagined as a conduit of resistance. As such, it becomes a strategic target. Strikes on power plants, sewage facilities, roads, and even hospitals are rationalized not only in tactical terms but as tools for demoralization and long-term incapacitation. Graham refers to this as "slow violence", a form of structural aggression that erodes a city's livability over time, often without the spectacle of dramatic explosions.[16]

This transformation in military strategy redefines cities not as territory to be seized but as systems to be broken. Interrupting electricity means halting hospital operations; destroying roads delays evacuation; targeting water and sewage spreads disease. The objective is to induce structural uninhabitability—to render the city increasingly unlivable, not through one decisive blow, but through cumulative infrastructural degradation.[17]

This infrastructural logic reflects broader shifts in the exercise of sovereign power. As theorists like Agamben and Mbembe contend, modern sovereignty operates not only through direct violence but through the regulation—and often the denial—of life-sustaining conditions. Urbicide, from this angle, becomes a necropolitical instrument: it governs by making life precarious through the targeted degradation of space.[18]

Hence, to understand urbicide today is to examine not only the rubble of destroyed buildings but the silent disintegration of urban systems. It is within this slow and often invisible disintegration that sovereign power is most deeply exercised.

1.3. Urbicide and Settler-Colonial Logics

The relationship between urbicide and settler colonialism reveals the deeper structural nature of urban destruction as a tool of elimination. Patrick Wolfe's well-known formulation "settler colonialism is a structure, not an event" [19] —underscores its permanence and its foundational logic: the removal and replacement of the native population.

Within this logic, the indigenous city constitutes both a demographic obstacle and a symbolic affront. It challenges settler claims to sovereignty and continuity by embodying memory, resistance, and rootedness. Therefore, its destruction serves multiple functions: it dissolves indigenous networks, undermines territorial claims, and nullifies visible markers of identity and collective history. [20] Recent research emphasizes that post-urbicidal

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15 Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege*, 145.
16 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.
17 Graham, *Cities Under Siege*, 163–166.
18 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 22.
19 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.
20 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5–6.

recovery must go beyond the reconstruction of material infrastructure toward the restoration of urban rights, spatial justice, and collective memory. Reclaiming the city after systematic annihilation is not merely a technical process but a political act of reconstituting sovereignty, belonging, and historical continuity.[21]

Lorenzo Veracini expands on this by arguing that settler colonialism does not merely seek to eliminate indigenous presence but also to overwrite it.[22] In urban terms, this means transforming vibrant indigenous neighborhoods into militarized zones, administrative voids, or spaces repurposed for colonial narratives. Urbicide becomes a method of spatial erasure, where absence is both material and symbolic.

Crucially, urbicide in this context does not only manifest in dramatic acts of war. It often precedes open conflict and operates through policies like land confiscation, movement restrictions, zoning laws, and deliberate underdevelopment.[23] These processes gradually corrode the conditions of urban life, paving the way for overt destruction. In this sense, urbicide is both spectacular and banal, both military and bureaucratic.

Seen this way, urbicide becomes a technology of settler governance. It targets the present viability of the indigenous city as well as its future potential. Its objective is not only to destroy but to deny the possibility of return, continuity, and resistance.

This section has constructed a theoretical grammar for understanding urbicide as a form of structural, symbolic, and strategic violence. Drawing from critical urban theory, necropolitics, settler-colonial studies, and decolonial thought, it has shown how the destruction of urban space targets not only material infrastructures but also memory, identity, and political possibility. In the chapters that follow, these theoretical tools will inform an analysis of Gaza (2023–2025) as a case of deep urban war, shaped by the intersecting logics of elimination, infrastructural warfare, and settler-colonial domination.

2. Urbicide as an Israeli Doctrine in Urban Warfare

Urbicide has evolved within Israeli military thinking and settler-colonial practice as more than a mere tactic of destruction; it has matured into a central doctrine of spatial control and ideological violence. It reflects a consistent strategy aimed at neutralizing Palestinian urban presence—physically, symbolically, and politically. This section traces the formation of urbicide as an Israeli doctrine across four interconnected dimensions: its ideological roots in settler-colonial logic; its foundational application during the 1948 Nakba; its doctrinal formalization—most notably through the *Dahiya* Doctrine; and its iterative refinement in the geographies of Palestinian cities, particularly Jenin and Gaza.

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[21] Şeniz Aslan, Metin Zafer and Fethi Güngör "Uluslararası Sosyal Çalışma Bağlamında Kentkırım." *İDEALKENT*, no. 48 (2025): 647–648.

[22] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 85.

[23] Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 125–130.

2.1. Ideological Roots and Settler-Colonial Logics

The genesis of Israeli urbicidal practices cannot be disentangled from the larger Zionist settler-colonial project. Its central logic lies in the elimination of the native to construct a new political and spatial order. Within this framework, Palestinian urban centers—dense with demographic vitality, cultural memory, and political resistance—emerge not as neutral spaces but as existential threats to the settler's imagined geography.

Zionist thought historically perceived Arab towns and villages as obstacles to be removed and landscapes to be reshaped. The goal extended beyond land acquisition; it encompassed the replacement of indigenous toponymy, memory, and built environments with a new colonial spatial order.[24]

To understand this process of spatial elimination, Frantz Fanon's theorization of colonial space as a "compartmentalized world" is instructive. In such a world, space is violently divided along lines of power, race, and domination.[25] Urbicide, then, becomes not merely the destruction of infrastructure but the obliteration of the very conditions that sustain indigenous urban life: continuity, autonomy, and resistance.

2.2. Foundational Violence and the Destruction of Palestinian Localities (1947–1949)

The initial implementation of urbicidal logic occurred during the 1947–1949 war. The execution of Plan Dalet, which explicitly targeted Palestinian population centers for depopulation and destruction, marked a pivotal moment in the reconfiguration of Palestinian space. Over 400 villages were erased, and major urban centers—such as Lydda, Ramla, and Haifa—were subjected to siege, expulsion, and property seizure.[26]

As Ilan Pappé has argued, the Nakba entailed not only the forced removal of people but also the deliberate eradication of the material and symbolic foundations of Palestinian urban life.[27] Homes were torched, villages bulldozed, cemeteries desecrated, and entire communities eliminated from the physical and cartographic record. These acts were not incidental to war—they were part of a strategic campaign of spatial cleansing.

The consequences of this foundational urbicide endure. Former Palestinian towns were transformed into Jewish settlements, forests, or military zones, effectively rewriting the geography of sovereignty. The destruction of indigenous urbanity became instrumental to asserting a new spatial order in which Palestinian presence was rendered illegible.

2.3. From Foundational Destruction to Formal Doctrine: The Dahiya Paradigm

What began as a settler-colonial strategy of territorial cleansing evolved into a formal military doctrine by the early twenty-first century. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon foreshadowed this transition, with the siege of West Beirut and the bombardment of

[24] Nur Masalha, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 202–210.
[25] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 3.
[26] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 60.
[27] Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing* , 24.

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Palestinian camps such as Tel al-Zaatar revealing a shift in military logic—from control to annihilation of urban coherence.[28]

This trajectory culminated in the articulation of the *Dahiya* Doctrine during the 2006 Lebanon War. Named after the heavily bombarded *Dahiya* district in Beirut, the doctrine was made explicit by General Gadi Eisenkot, who declared that any area serving as a base for attacks would face overwhelming and disproportionate force, irrespective of civilian presence.[29]

The *Dahiya* Doctrine reframes urban areas as hostile systems, justifying their destruction under the guise of deterrence. As Eyal Weizman notes, the city itself becomes a military formation: layered, resistant, and symbolically defiant.[30] The targeting of civilian infrastructure—towers, hospitals, mosques, universities—is not a tactical error but a strategic message. The objective is not only to degrade enemy capabilities but to render urban life itself unviable for those perceived as aligned with resistance networks.[7]

This logic has been systematically deployed in Gaza through operations such as Cast Lead (2008–2009), Protective Edge (2014), and most intensively during the 2023–2025 offensive. With AI-assisted targeting, real-time intelligence, and bureaucratic mechanisms of destruction, Gaza has become a laboratory for the doctrinal application of urbicide.

Stephen Graham characterizes this approach as a manifestation of "new military urbanism," where the destruction of cities becomes a long-term strategy of infrastructural and psychological degradation.[31] Urbicide, in this context, is not an aberration but a systemic outcome of modern warfare logic.

2.4. Palestine as a Laboratory of Urbicidal Doctrine: From Jenin to Gaza

The 2002 assault on the Jenin refugee camp illustrates the tactical sophistication of urbicide. Rather than maneuvering through streets, Israeli forces employed "walking through walls" tactics, penetrating buildings to create unpredictable pathways.[32] This method disrupted both the spatial order of the camp and the psychological bearings of its residents, collapsing traditional geographies of resistance.

This maneuver was not just practical—it embodied a philosophy of spatial domination. The urban environment was treated not as a setting, but as an adversary to be disassembled from within.

In Gaza, urbicide has reached its most intensive application. Neighborhoods such as Shuja'iyya, Zeitoun, Beit Hanoun, and Rimal have been subjected to methodical

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[28] Rashid Khalidi, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking during the 1982 War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 88–95

[29] Fadi G. Marei, "Dahiya Doctrine," in *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions, and Regime Change*, ed. I. William Zartman (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2020), 75–76

[30] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 13.

[31] Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege*, 4.

[32] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land, 185.*

destruction. Hospitals, schools, mosques, media institutions, and universities have been struck under the rationale of dual-use or symbolic alignment with resistance.

Surveillance technologies, algorithmic strike approval systems, and real-time aerial mapping have transformed Gaza into a real-time laboratory for experimenting with urbicidal warfare.[33] Here, the goal is not merely to defeat resistance but to engineer the collapse of its spatial and societal foundations.

Gaza is thus more than a battleground—it is the apotheosis of the urbicidal state: a place where the destruction of space serves as a strategy of discipline, deterrence, and temporal dislocation. In this paradigm, the future itself becomes a casualty, preemptively neutralized through the erasure of urban life.

The evolution of urbicide from a settler-colonial impulse to a formalized Israeli military doctrine reflects a deep and ongoing entanglement between spatial control and ideological violence. What began as the erasure of Palestinian localities during the Nakba has developed into a calculated, technologized, and replicable strategy aimed at dismantling the very conditions of urban life. Whether through the foundational acts of 1948, the codification of the *Dahiya* Doctrine, or the experimental destruction of Jenin and Gaza, Israeli urban warfare has consistently treated the city not merely as a site of conflict, but as a target of elimination. This doctrine of urbicide is not confined to the battlefield—it structures how space is governed, memory is erased, and futures are foreclosed. In the chapters that follow, we will examine how this logic was operationalized during the 2023–2025 war on Gaza, and what strategic, political, and humanitarian consequences it has produced on the ground.

3. The Architecture of Erasure: Spatial and Infrastructural Destruction in Gaza (2023–2025)

This section investigates the architecture of erasure that structured Israel's military campaign against Gaza from 2023 to 2025. It argues that destruction was not incidental but integral to a broader strategy of urbicide—aimed at dismantling Gaza as a coherent urban, political, and social entity. Through data, spatial analysis, and critical urban theory, the chapter traces how civilian infrastructure became a central target of war and how destruction operated not merely as a tactical military tool, but as a form of structural and symbolic violence.

3.1. Typologies and Patterns of Destruction

The destruction that unfolded across Gaza followed discernible spatial and functional patterns. According to the April 2025 UNOSAT damage assessment, nearly 70% of all structures in Gaza were damaged or destroyed—including more than 330,000 residential units, 143 schools, 828 mosques, and 225 government buildings.[34] The war did not only

[33] Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011), 108–110.

[34] UNOSAT (United Nations Satellite Centre), *Gaza Strip Comprehensive Damage Assessment: As of 04 April 2025*, published 7 May 2025, https://unosat.org/static/unosat_filesystem/4130/UN-OCHA_026_UNOSAT_A3_GazaStrip_CDA_04April2025.pdf

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target military sites, but systematically dismantled the city's material scaffolding: housing, healthcare, education, governance, transportation, and water systems.

This comprehensive targeting reveals a typology of destruction that reflects strategic intent. The damage was not random nor merely collateral; it was patterned, calibrated, and cumulative—aimed at rendering Gaza socially fragmented and physically uninhabitable. The destruction of schools and universities, in particular, strikes at the epistemological core of the city, while the targeting of mosques and churches undermines the spiritual and symbolic foundations of communal life. The table below summarizes the principal categories of destruction between October 2023 and July 2025:

Table 01: Categories of Destroyed Infrastructure (Oct 2023 – July 7, 2025)

Category	Estimated Damage
Residential Units	330,500+
Hospitals (Partially Functional)	17
Schools & Universities (Destroyed)	143
Schools & Universities (Damaged)	366
Mosques	828
Churches	3
Government HQs	225
Water Infrastructure	~70%
Roads	~92%
Total Destroyed Buildings	68,918

Source: Data compiled by the author based on: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and UNOSAT, *Damage Assessment, April–July 2025*, https://www.pcbs.gov.ps.

This data underscores the strategic nature of the destruction: the targeting of residential structures on such a massive scale (over 330,000 units) is not simply a byproduct of urban warfare, but a direct blow to Gaza's demographic coherence and civilian anchorage. The destruction of educational institutions (over 500 schools and universities) and places of worship (over 800 mosques and 3 churches) reveals an effort to dismantle the epistemological and spiritual infrastructure of the city—spaces where identity, memory, and social reproduction are forged.

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In addition, the destruction of government headquarters (225 buildings) and critical transportation and water infrastructure (92% and 70% destroyed, respectively) reflects an intent to disable governance functions and render urban sovereignty unviable. This destruction strategy corresponds to what Eyal Weizman describes as a mode of "organized abandonment"—a form of warfare that deactivates urban futures by destroying the infrastructural basis of recovery and resistance.[35] It also echoes Stephen Graham's concept of infrastructural warfare, where urban metabolism—water, mobility, electricity—is deliberately severed.[36]

In this light, the destruction documented in Table 1 should not be interpreted as collateral, but as infrastructural disarmament: a strategic method to dismantle the civilian depth that sustains both governance and resistance. The war thus reconfigures Gaza not only through what it kills, but through what it makes impossible to rebuild.

3.2. Spatial Progression and the Chronology of Urbicide

The cumulative trends presented in Table 1 are vividly reinforced by the chronological map data tracking the evolution of destruction across the Gaza Strip from October 2023 to January 2025. The following visual representation illustrates this evolving pattern, offering a spatialized chronology of destruction that reflects the strategic depth and temporal intensification of the targeting campaign. This four-stage visual dataset illustrates the expansion of urban devastation from the northern and central areas—including Gaza City and Khan Yunis—toward the southernmost zones like Rafah.

Image 01: Chronology of Destruction in Gaza (Oct 2023 – Jan 2025): A Spatial Progression of Urbicide

Source: Hanna Duggal and Marium Ali, "Israel-Hamas Ceasefire: What's Left of Gaza and Its People?" *Al Jazeera*, 16 January 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/16/israel-hamas-ceasefire-whats-left-of-gaza-and-its-people.

[35] Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils, 110.*
[36] Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege, 144-145.*

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The spatial targeting unfolded in phases, expanding from northern Gaza in late 2023 to central and southern zones by 2025. According to a UNOSAT visual progression map, red-marked destruction areas surged across Gaza City, North Gaza, Khan Yunis, and finally Rafah.(4) By January 2025, Gaza City recorded 74% structural destruction, followed by North Gaza (70%), Khan Yunis (55%), Deir al-Balah (50%), and Rafah (48%).[37]

What begins as concentrated targeting in the north (October 2023) becomes, by early 2025, a near-total spatial saturation of destruction throughout the Strip. The maps affirm the argument that the war was designed not merely to suppress armed factions but to restructure Gaza as an ungovernable and uninhabitable space. The synchronized reading of the map and the table reveals how residential zones, health and educational facilities, and vital infrastructure were not only disproportionately damaged but systematically selected to fracture urban continuity. This evolving spatial annihilation also supports Weizman's notion of "forensic architecture," where destruction is engineered to serve both military and political aims.[38] In this case, the mapping of devastation becomes a cartography of domination, turning Gaza from a contested city into a controlled void.

3.3. Displacement as a Strategic Weapon

The destruction of Gaza's urban infrastructure has generated one of the most intense and prolonged displacement crises in modern conflict. By January 2025, more than 1.9 million Palestinians—roughly 85% of Gaza's population—had been forcibly displaced.[39] This displacement was not merely a consequence of violence but part of a deliberate strategy. With each military push, populations were compressed into increasingly constrained zones, only to be displaced again. "Safe zones" often became new targets, turning movement itself into a condition of vulnerability. Graph 1 presents the cumulative increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Gaza between October 2023 and January 2025, capturing the exponential growth of displacement across successive military phases and highlighting the scale and continuity of forced unrooting.

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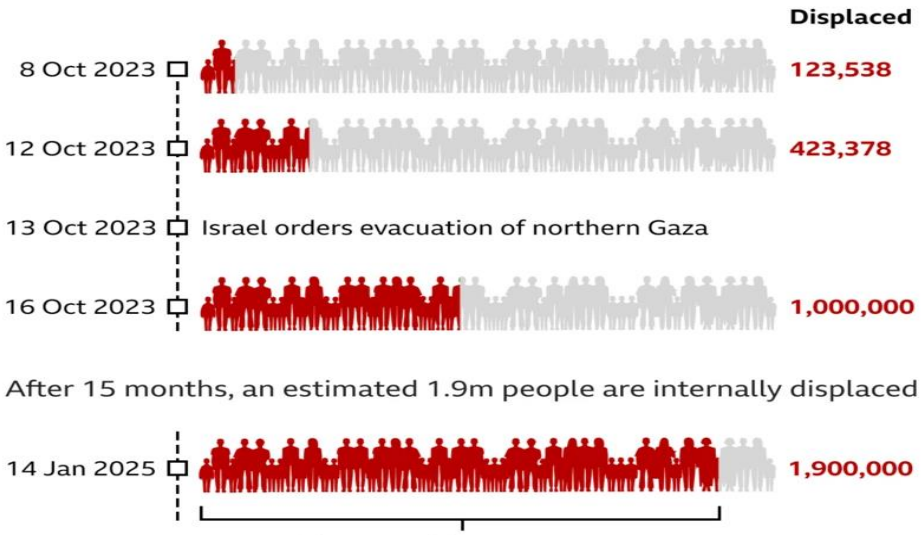
[37] Duggal and Ali, "Israel-Hamas Ceasefire," para. 1
[38] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 229-230.
[39] BBC News, "Gaza Strip in Maps: How 15 Months of War Don Change Life for Di Area," *BBC News Pidgin*, 17 January 2025, https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/c1dggqr6351o

Graph 01: Cumulative Displacement Trends in Gaza (Oct 2023 – Jan 2025)
Source: The graph published by BBC News Pidgin (17 January 2025)



The graph clearly illustrates this dynamic, tracking the steady and dramatic rise in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) between October 2023 and mid-January 2025. The visual trajectory captures how displacement became not only quantitatively overwhelming, but qualitatively transformative—turning the entirety of Gaza into a shifting terrain of precarity and dispossession. This pattern supports the interpretation of displacement as a strategic tool of war. It serves not only to fragment the civilian population, but to degrade urban continuity, dismantle neighborhood structures, and neutralize the social and spatial bases of resistance. In this view, displacement functions as a weaponized form of urban disruption—reshaping Gaza into a zone of impermanence, vulnerability, and administrative collapse.

3.4. Reconstruction Denied: Ruins as Policy

Beyond the immediate human and material toll, the destruction in Gaza represents an attempt to render parts of the Strip uninhabitable for the foreseeable future. The calculated targeting of public records offices, archives, universities, and municipal buildings suggests an effort not only to demolish infrastructure but to erase urban memory and bureaucratic continuity.

The long-term consequences of this destruction—compounded by Israel's continued restrictions on the entry of reconstruction materials—have transformed Gaza into what the World Bank describes as a "zone of ruins." According to the February 2025 joint assessment by the World Bank, UN, and EU, the total damage exceeded $18.5 billion, with over 60% of housing units rendered uninhabitable and nearly 80% of commercial and industrial facilities either destroyed or severely damaged. This pattern of devastation aligns with the findings of the "Gaza & West Bank Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment" (IRDNA), which concluded that the damage inflicted on Gaza's infrastructure and

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economy reflects a long-term trajectory of de-development, systematically preventing postwar recovery, reconstruction, and economic sustainability.[40]

Moreover, the destruction of public archives, municipal records, and cultural landmarks suggests a deeper goal: the erasure of memory and continuity. Gaza is not merely being bombed—it is being unmade as a space of collective identity and political potential. The war thus becomes an architecture of erasure, where ruin is not the end state but the intended spatial condition.

The 2023 war on Gaza reflects the maturation of urbicide into a systematic doctrine of spatial domination. By targeting infrastructure, disrupting urban continuity, and denying the conditions for recovery, Israel's strategy reveals a new mode of warfare—one that weaponizes destruction not only to defeat resistance, but to erase the city itself as a political, cultural, and demographic reality. This chapter has shown that the war on Gaza must be understood not merely as an episode of military escalation, but as a calculated and sustained assault on the very possibility of urban life.

4. After Urbicide: Gaza's Spatial Erasure and the Politics of Survival

This concluding part synthesizes the key findings of the previous sections and explores the broader implications of Israel's war strategy on Gaza and the Palestinian issue. It argues that urbicide, spatial erasure, and forced displacement have not only reshaped Gaza's geography but redefined the strategic logic and ethical boundaries of contemporary warfare. These dynamics are unpacked in three interrelated axes: the spatial Nakba, the rendering of Gaza as uninhabitable, and Gaza's symbolic reconfiguration as a site of resistance.

4.1. The Spatial Nakba: Toward a New Era of Urban Dispossession

The destruction of Gaza's built environment between 2023 and 2025 constitutes what may be termed a *Spatial Nakba*—an intentional strategy of architectural erasure and forced spatial reconfiguration. Echoing the traumatic displacement of 1948, this campaign operates not only through the displacement of people but also through the systematic obliteration of homes, schools, archives, and cultural spaces that constitute Gaza's urban memory and identity. [41]

Unlike the demographic Nakba of 1948, this iteration targets the continuity of urban life itself. Urban landscapes are transformed into ruins, not as collateral damage but as an intentional strategy to sever place from people and eliminate the infrastructural conditions necessary for civic reproduction. Satellite imagery and UNOSAT damage assessments from 2025 indicate that approximately 70% of Gaza's structures were destroyed or severely damaged, with Rafah and Khan Yunis experiencing the most catastrophic loss.

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[40] World Bank, United Nations, and European Union, *Gaza and West Bank Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment Report*, 18 February 2025, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/ 133c3304e29086819c1119fe8e85366b-0280012025/original/ Gaza-RDNA-final-med.pdf

[41] Raja Khalidi and Qais Iwidat, "Assessing the Economic and Social Impacts of Israel's War on Palestine," *al-Muntaqa* 7, no. 1 (January/February 2024*)*: 86.

This spatial devastation fractures intergenerational continuity and displaces memory. It undermines the very scaffolding upon which future sovereignty might be imagined or built. As with the original Nakba, the politics of return and reconstruction are not merely logistical challenges but existential questions tied to legitimacy, identity, and futurity in a settler-colonial framework.[42]

4.2. Gaza as an Uninhabitable Urban Space

One of the most consequential outcomes of the 2023–2025 war has been the transformation of Gaza from a densely populated urban entity into a structurally uninhabitable space. This goes beyond visible destruction—it constitutes a deliberate form of spatial warfare designed to render life itself impossible and to deter the return of displaced populations. *Uninhabitability* here is both material and psychological: a result of orchestrated infrastructural collapse, prolonged siege, and bureaucratic fragmentation.

Water systems, electricity grids, hospitals, educational institutions, and administrative buildings were not accidentally damaged—they were systematically targeted. According to UNDP reports from mid-2025, nearly 90% of Gaza's population lacked consistent access to potable water. Entire districts such as Beit Hanoun and northern Rafah were declared unfit for human habitation due to structural instability, toxic debris, and the total collapse of essential services.[43]

This deliberate rendering of Gaza as unlivable reflects a deeper dimension of settler-colonial control. It is not only about capturing land but about excluding the indigenous population from inhabiting or reclaiming it. As Eyal Weizman explains through the concept of *forensic architecture*, violence against space itself becomes a form of warfare aimed at erasing the possibility of urban life. Public institutions—schools, hospitals, municipal archives—have been annihilated, along with roads, bridges, and sewage systems. UNOSAT's satellite data confirms that the destruction was disproportionately concentrated in zones of dense population and historical resistance. Such patterns reveal a logic of demographic neutralization through spatial dismemberment.[44]

Further compounding this devastation is the regime of reconstruction imposed by Israel. The permit system, control over materials, and political conditionalities have transformed the post-war rebuilding process into a domain of biopolitical control. Gaza thus finds itself in a cruel paradox: ruined, yet systematically prevented from recovery.

This strategy is not only aimed at present incapacitation but at erasing the very future of Gaza. It targets the imagination of continuity, mobility, and sovereignty. Urbicide here

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[42] Angelica Wahono, "Erasing Gaza's Future: Why the ICC Must Explicitly Charge All Forms of Reproductive Violence in Gaza — Including as Genocide," *Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice*, May 5, 2025, https://4genderjustice.org/our-latest-posts/erasing-gazas-future/#_ftnref20

[43] World Bank, United Nations, and European Union, *Gaza and West Bank Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment* (Interim Report, 18 February 2025), https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/133c3304e29086819c1119fe8e85366b-0280012025/original/Gaza-RDNA-final-med.pdf

[44] United Nations OCHA and UNOSAT, *Gaza Damage Assessment Overview Map* (April 2025), https://unosat.org/static/unosat_filesystem/4130/UN-OCHA_026_UNOSAT_A3_GazaStrip_CDA_04April2025.pdf

becomes a war not only on the body but on the potential of urban life itself—a re-articulation of the Nakba through contemporary modalities of infrastructural obliteration and administrative violence.

4.3. Ecological Devastation and Environmental Warfare in Gaza

Beyond the visible destruction of buildings and infrastructure, the 2023–2025 war on Gaza has generated a profound ecological catastrophe that extends the logic of urbicide into the environmental domain. The deliberate targeting of agricultural lands, water aquifers, and waste systems transformed Gaza's landscape into what Molavi terms "a new ecology of occupation," where environmental degradation becomes a weapon of colonial domination.[45]

Toxic debris from bombed residential areas, pulverized concrete dust, and the widespread contamination of soil and groundwater have produced an unprecedented environmental crisis in Gaza. Recent assessments indicate that the conflict has generated over 50 million tons of debris and hazardous waste, including asbestos, heavy metals, and unexploded ordnance, dispersed across densely populated areas.[46] This massive accumulation of toxic materials has rendered large parts of the Gaza Strip ecologically devastated and structurally uninhabitable, with soil and groundwater contamination posing long-term risks to public health, agriculture, and urban recovery.[47] The resulting environmental degradation reinforces Gaza's transformation into an unlivable zone—where the destruction of the built environment extends into the destruction of the ecological foundations of life itself.

Environmental warfare thus emerges as an extension of spatial violence. It weaponizes nature itself—air, water, and soil—transforming environmental systems into tools of siege and dispossession. The destruction of farmlands and greenhouses, the targeting of solar-energy facilities, and the contamination of aquifers through military bombardment amount to a systematic assault on Gaza's ecological sovereignty. As forensic investigations such as "A Cartography of Genocide" demonstrate, the Israeli campaign has reconfigured Gaza's terrain into a devastated ecological landscape, where environmental collapse functions as a slow form of structural elimination.[48]

In this sense, the urbicidal destruction of Gaza cannot be understood solely as a spatial or architectural phenomenon. It also represents a form of environmental colonization—a

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45 Shourideh C. Molavi, *Environmental Warfare in Gaza: Colonial Violence and New Landscapes of Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2024), 22.

46 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and Environment Quality Authority (EQA), Press Release by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and Environment Quality Authority on World Environment Day under the theme "Gaza in WED: Stifling Environmental and Humanitarian Crisis" (Ramallah: PCBS and EQA, June 5, 2025), https://environment.ps/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/World-Environment-Day-en.pdf

47 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Gaza: Preliminary Assessment of Environmental Impacts (Nairobi: UNEP, June 18, 2024), https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/damage-gaza-causing-new-risks-human-health-and-long-term-recovery

48 Forensic Architecture, "A Cartography of Genocide: Israel's Conduct in Gaza since October 2023," 2024, https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/a-cartography-of-genocide

process that erases both human and ecological life, blurring the boundary between genocide and ecocide. The war's aftermath thus demands a dual framework of reconstruction: one that addresses not only the rebuilding of urban infrastructure but the restoration of Gaza's environmental viability and the right to ecological self-determination.

4.4. Gaza as a Symbolic City: Horizons of Urban Resistance

Despite the scale and intensity of destruction, Gaza has emerged as a renewed site of symbolic and political resistance. Much like Beirut in 1982 and Sarajevo in the 1990s, Gaza has entered global consciousness not only as a space of suffering but as a locus of defiant endurance.[49]

Civil society actors, militants, and ordinary civilians have adapted to fragmented urban realities. Testimonies from displaced families, refusal to evacuate symbolic spaces, and the re-appropriation of images of ruin have all contributed to a new aesthetic and narrative of steadfastness. This has allowed destruction to be transformed into a platform of advocacy and solidarity, both regionally and globally.

The symbolic and infrastructural reconstitution of Gaza amid ongoing devastation invites a new analytical lens—one that understands resistance not as mere reaction but as generative. Gaza becomes not only a battlefield but a *political horizon*, where ruins are reimagined as spaces of struggle, identity, and futurity.

Nevertheless, the collapse of urban infrastructure also imposed profound operational limits on organized resistance. Mobility, coordination, and communication were severely restricted. Yet the resilience shown—symbolic, social, and strategic—has redefined the logic of resistance under conditions of structural erasure. The city, even in its ruins, becomes a space of articulation and political reimagination.

Gaza's urbicide is not merely a campaign of physical destruction—it is a layered project of spatial elimination, demographic engineering, and symbolic subjugation. Yet, within this landscape of ruins, new geographies of defiance are emerging. The war on Gaza has redrawn its urban space, but it has also rearticulated the meaning of resistance, memory, and political futurity. As urbicide attempts to erase, it inadvertently affirms Gaza's centrality to the unresolved tensions of sovereignty, settler-colonialism, and the right to the city.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that urbicide in Gaza between 2023 and 2025 operates not as a byproduct of war but as a central pillar of Israel's military and spatial strategy. The systematic destruction of infrastructure, the targeted unmaking of civic life, and the rendering of Gaza as uninhabitable reflect a deliberate effort to restructure urban space as a domain of control, erasure, and deterrence. This strategy functions within a settler-

[49] Rafeef Ziadah et al., "Disruptive Geographies and the War on Gaza: Infrastructure and Global Solidarity," *Geopolitics*, published online June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2510319

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colonial logic that seeks to eliminate the conditions of Palestinian urban continuity—materially, symbolically, and politically.

Crucially, the study demonstrates that urbicide in Gaza cannot be reduced to material violence alone. It extends to the erasure of memory, the disruption of collective life, and the denial of futurity. Yet, paradoxically, these acts of spatial erasure have also generated new geographies of resistance. Ruins have become sites of defiance; fragmentation has compelled alternative forms of organization and meaning-making. Gaza thus emerges not only as a victim of urban annihilation but as a locus of political rearticulation—where the city, even in its destruction, continues to assert its presence.

For future research, several avenues remain open. First, comparative studies with other sites of urbicide—such as Sarajevo, Grozny, or Aleppo—could enrich understanding of how spatial destruction functions across different geopolitical contexts. Second, deeper engagement with the everyday experiences of survivors, particularly through ethnographic or narrative methods, may illuminate how urban life is reassembled amidst structural devastation. Finally, further theoretical exploration of the relationship between settler-colonialism and urban unmaking is needed, especially in contexts where war, occupation, and displacement converge in long-term spatial strategies of control.

Declarations

1. **Ethics committee approval:** Not needed for this study.

2. Author contribution: The author declares that no one else has contributed to the article.

3. Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

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