



## Viewpoint

## On spaciocide and resistance: Between Bi'r as-Sab'a and Gaza

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On October 7, 2023, the militant group Hamas launched an attack on southern Israel, killing 764 Israeli civilians and migrant workers and 373 Israeli military personnel, and seizing 248 hostages. In response, Israel initiated a counterattack on Gaza that has thus far killed at least 38,200 people and forcibly displaced another 1.9 million. Israel has dropped 75,000 tonnes of explosives on Gaza, purposefully destroying more than half of the built environment. Houses, universities, hospitals, water treatment plants, sewers, and roads have all been ruined, with an estimated 12,000 dead trapped under the debris. Israeli bombing has especially targeted places that facilitate daily life and civic activity, such as the commercial street of Omar Al-Mukhtar, and the city hall of Gaza and the public library housed within it. Religious and cultural heritage sites also have been eliminated, including the Tunisian cemetery in Gaza City's Shajaiye neighbourhood and the ancient Great Omari Mosque, which had been rebuilt many times over the centuries and had served as a symbol of resilience against many colonizers. Israeli attacks on greenhouses, fields, and irrigation in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, which provide over 30 percent of Gaza's food, have caused long-term damage to the economy and contributed to the starvation of the population.

While the scale of killing and destruction has been unprecedented, what we are witnessing in Gaza needs to be understood against the wider backdrop of *al-Nakba* ("the catastrophe") - a term that refers to the uprooting of Palestinians from their homes and lands during the 1948 Israeli-Arab War and the formation of the state of Israel on 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007). *Al-Nakba* transcends simplistic binaries of past and present: it marks both a rupture in time for Palestinians and a continuous reality of displacement, spaciocide, and denial of history and identity (Sanbar, 2001). Sleman Aldbary, a Palestinian Bedouin media activist, explained to us how during *al-Nakba* his tribe found refuge in Gaza after Israel displaced them from their village of Wadi Al-Shalala in the Bi'r as-Saba district. In a tragic reoccurrence of this trauma, Aldbary lost his home again as result of the Israeli attack on Gaza, which, as we write, is entering its tenth month. As he describes, "all our homes and the homes of our tribe were wiped out, and we are

still not able to return to them."

In this brief commentary, we illuminate connections between histories and geographies of spatial violence that Palestinians continue to endure. Our aim is to unpack how the deliberate destruction of buildings and systematic spatial annihilation through warfare corresponds with "slower" settler-colonial violence directed at people and places, nature, and the built environment. We explore this relationship using the example of Bi'r as-Sab'a district in southern Israel. In 1948, Zionist militias seized control of the district (including the main town of Bi'r as-Sab'a and the surrounding Bedouin villages) forcing the majority of inhabitants to flee. Like Aldbary's tribe, many found shelter in the Gaza Strip and are now facing another catastrophe. Meanwhile, in the Bi'r as-Sab'a district itself, Israel has been demolishing Bedouin villages that remained after 1948 - Wadi al-Khalil, Al-Fora'a, Umm Batin, Bi'r Hadaj, and Alaraqib - leaving these communities homeless. The pretext for these demolitions has been to make way for a highway; the legal justification has been that these are "unrecognized villages," and thus illegal. It is essential to recognize the intertwined nature of the harm against the physical, social, and ecological infrastructures of cities and villages in the regions of Gaza and Bi'r as-Sab'a. The extent of destruction varies between these two contexts, but both cases demonstrate the consistency of settler-colonial tactics.

Prior to *al-Nakba*, the regions of Gaza and Bi'r as-Sab'a were deeply interconnected, forming a unified southern district until the Ottoman government implemented the Provincial Laws of 1864-71 that divided the region into smaller administrative units. This separation aimed to improve governance, end municipal corruption, and put a halt to Bedouin tribal conflicts over land (Avci, 2009). Still, the regions remained linked by agriculture (wheat, barley, and maize) and commercial relationships (Nasasra, 2017). Both regions were key battlegrounds when the British seized control of Palestine during the First World War. At that time, the residents of Gaza district were subjected to deportation by the Ottomans and to deliberate attack on their geographical space by the British, resulting in great ecological damage and infrastructural ruin (Halevy, 2015). Next, in 1948, Israel seized

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access to most of Gaza's agricultural hinterland, and inhabitants of the newly formed Gaza Strip became stateless, continuously deprived of their citizenship, first by Egypt (which managed territorial rights in Gaza), and after 1967 by Israel. The Gaza Strip absorbed many of the Palestinian refugees of *al-Nakba*, and its cities grew immensely as makeshift camps emerged on their margins. These camps remain unintegrated into the urban fabric to this day as a spatially articulated demand for refugees' right of return (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shifan, 2020).

Scholars have coined the concept of "urbicide" to describe the targeted eradication of the physical and symbolic infrastructures of common life and citizenship (Abujidi, 2014; Coward, 2008). "Ecocide," similarly, denotes a deliberate long-term damage to the environment that sustains life and the relationships between humans and nature (Lindgren, 2018). A further concept of "spaciocide" has been introduced to describe the more comprehensive attack on rural and urban spaces to which Palestine has been subjected since 1948 (Hanafi, 2006). Spaciocide is a process with a unified rationale, but with dynamic operations and varied executioners, ranging from soldiers and settlers, to lawyers and urban planners. This continuum of destructive capacity manifests itself in the acute traumas and prolonged harms inflicted on places like Bi'r es-Sab'a and Gaza.

One illustration of the varied workings of spaciocide is the Israeli Absentee Property Law of 1950, which designated Palestinian refugees "absentee" and their lands and homes "absentee property" belonging to the state. By legalizing the colonial process of dispossession and appropriation, this law greatly facilitated the ethnic cleansing of the Bi'r as-Sab'a district and other Palestinian lands. Palestinian cities and ancestral lands could then be repopulated by the Jewish population, as was the case with Bi'r as-Sab'a old city that Israel then extended into a bigger settlement (Falah, 1989). Repopulation efforts included the construction of the kibbutzim of Nirim, Nir Oz, Magen, and Ein Hash-losha on the lands of the Bedouin Ma'in Abu Sitta villages located on the outskirts of Gaza (these are some of the kibbutzim targeted by Hamas on October 7, 2023). In the early post-Nakba years, the few Bedouin tribes that remained in the Bi'r as-Sab'a region were displaced from their villages and placed in an enclosed area under military rule until 1966; their lands were then declared "unregistered" and therefore property of the state (Yiftachel, 2009).

Israel later replaced its colonial tactic with enforced urbanization, establishing new planned towns for the Bedouin population under the pretence of modernization (Abu-Saad, 2008). The small houses in these towns are unsuitable for large families, and their density clashes with the traditional agropastoral lifestyle of the Bedouins. Hence, some Bedouin resist their forced urbanization and continue to live in villages located on their ancestors' land or on land to which they were initially transferred after 1948. Recently, in the shadow of the ongoing war in Gaza, the Israeli government has initiated a new wave of housing demolitions in these villages. As alluded to above, the Planning and Construction Law of 1967 provides the legal pathway to regard these villages as "unrecognized localities," thereby subjecting them to repeated waves of demolitions. Related to this process has been the deliberate modification of natural landscapes and ecosystems in the Bi'r as-Sab'a region, where afforestation under the guise of conservation is continually used to colonize Bedouin-Palestinian lands and to displace communities.

Settler-colonial societies thus rely not only on brute force to clear people from land, but on systems of laws and property regimes that suppress indigenous property allocation and land rights (Blomley, 2004). Hence, the 1948 *Nakba*, the long-term assault on Bedouin villages in Bi'r as-Sab'a, and the current attack on Gaza are different manifestations of the same logic of settler-colonial accumulation through dispossession and spaciocide. The main tool to implement this logic is the bulldozer. Since the 1980s, the Israeli army has been modifying D9 bulldozers supplied by the American company Caterpillar for military purposes. These have been instrumental to warfare in Gaza, being used

to lead ground assaults, to clear roads, and to destroy buildings. In Bi'r as-Sab'a, bulldozers raze entire Bedouin villages, with their homes, mosques, cemeteries, roads, and flora (bulldozers have also had a notorious role in the creation of illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank). The targeting of places of local significance not only displaces people but also wipes out the personal and cultural memories that sustain relationships to [home/lands](#).

As *al-Nakba* transcends simplistic temporal boundaries, so do attempts to live through it and to resist it. In the months following *al-Nakba*, Bedouin families and tribes, such as the Tayaha and Dhullam, were scattered across different countries and separated by newly formed borders. Nevertheless, they found ways to manoeuvre these borders and to sustain connectivity with their relatives and neighbours, through an increasingly lucrative and illegal cross-border economy, through marriages that reunite families separated in 1948, and through relationships with the Palestinian administration (Parizot, 2001). To this day, Bedouins demonstrate remarkable resilience against Israel's continuous efforts to relocate them from "unrecognized localities" by withholding basic services, deploying civil sanctions, and launching demolition campaigns.

For over a century, colonial invasions and settler-colonial dispossession have entailed a combination of ethnic cleansing, genocide, urbicide, and ecocide, reflecting the interconnectedness of violence against human populations, place, and the environment. The multiple forms of attacks against Palestinian space in 1948 and over the past 76 years of occupation, blockade, settler colonialism, and apartheid exemplify the varied but also consistent nature of colonial spaciocide - whether deployed by military and paramilitary powers or through more subtle administrative processes. Our aim is not to homogenize the different colonial processes occurring in different types of areas, but rather to draw attention to their underlying logic of spatial annihilation which, whether directed against built urban area, heritage sites, homes, and/or land and its natural resources, aims to harm the life, connections, and memories they sustain.

It is essential to recognize the relationship between ethnic-cleansing, genocide, spaciocide, and resistance, for the sake of restoring the fabric of indigenous Palestinian society and for achieving spatial justice, freedom, and safety for all inhabitants in the region—including Israelis, who have themselves been harmed by the outcomes of violent settler-colonialism, as the events of October 7, 2023, show. The cyclical and persistent nature of this violence, it seems, has no limits. Title 18, Section 1091 of the United States legal code defines genocide as "violent attacks with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group." The physical destruction of Gaza provides ample evidence for such genocidal intent—evidence routinely ignored by Israel's Western allies. Nevertheless, the annihilation of Palestine as a place and an identity has never fully succeeded. Palestine remains owing to Palestinians' acts of liveability, survival, resistance, and commemoration.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Michal Huss:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sleman Althehe:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

#### Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflict of interests to declare.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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