



**Léopold  
Lambert**

**THE CONTINUOUS SIEGE ///  
Spectacular and Normal  
Territorial Violence  
in Gaza**

**FallSemester**

## **THE CONTINUOUS SIEGE ///**

### **Spectacular and Normal Territorial Violence in Gaza**

Léopold Lambert

As the Israeli bombs stop raining on Gaza and, with them, the outrage that this recent chapter of the continuous siege on this small land of Palestinian territory triggered, the last thing that we should wish is that things “go back to normal.” The normal is unacceptable, since it is made of the same violence than the bombings, only in a less spectacular manner. Throughout this text, I propose to use the oxymoronic phrase of “normal violence” in order to describe the (infra)structural subjection imposed on the Gaza inhabitants.

In this regard, I consider important to introduce a problematization of the words we use to describe this situation, since, too often, words betray political sympathy in what they imply silently. An expressive example consists in the designation of figures of innocence as it has been done during July and August 2014 when 2,131 Palestinians died from the actions of the Israeli army. Children, and sometimes women, were designated by well-intentioned medias as innocent victims, thus denying such a status to the men of Gaza whose death became implicitly legitimized discursively. The language we use is important in that it composes an imaginary that either conforms to the one that fuels the *status quo* – even when

it claims not to – or challenges it in depth. When it comes to the Palestinian struggle, traditional element of language that suggests symmetrical characteristics between the Palestinian people and the Israeli army, such as “conflict,” “peace process,” “security measures,” or the non-differentiation of military and civil casualties, is profoundly misleading about the reality of the situation in Palestine. I will therefore refrain from the use of any of these phrases throughout this text.

## ARCHITECTURE OF CONTAINMENT AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

If we consider architecture as the discipline that organizes bodies in space, we understand that the continuous siege fundamentally implements itself through architecture, both in its spectacular and normal violence. The paradigmatic element of such a militarized use of architecture consists in the containment of the 1.8 million Gaza inhabitants within the Gaza strip without possible exit for them. This containment is implemented through a restricted accessible area in the Mediterranean Sea – the limit varies between 3 and 6 nautical miles depending on the political intensity of the situation – and through a combination of walls and restricted zones on the land border. The normal violence of the wall and the impossibility for Gaza inhabitants to exit their small territory is exacerbated in times of military invasion as it has been repeatedly the case in the recent years. The Gaza strip then becomes a controlled battlefield for the Israeli army that contains it within limits it defines. Architecture’s violence is fully at work in this situation and we can think of the antic Roman games containing the organized spectacular slaughter they displayed within the perimeter of the arena. The principle of a wall consists in the selection of who gets to cross it (i.e. who owns the key to the door) and who does not. In this specific case, the barrier that

makes Gaza the “largest prison in the world” is porous to the Israeli army while being fully opaque and inaccessible for the Palestinian people.



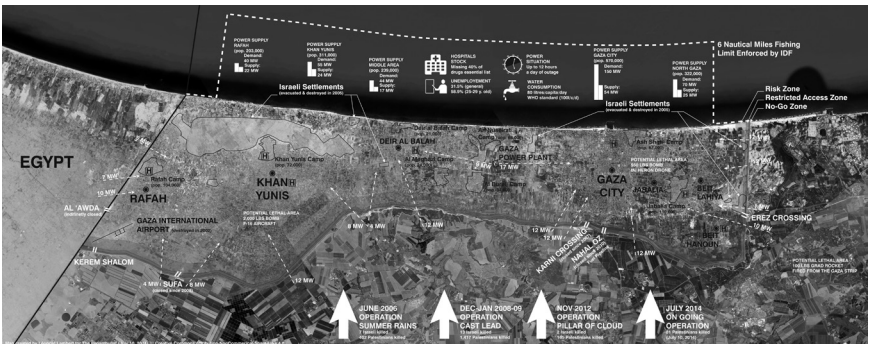
Cartography of the Forced Displacement – Made by the author (August 4, 2014)

The wall that separates the Gaza strip from the Israeli territory and Egypt is indeed complemented by the enforcement of offset areas composed by a 100-meter-wide “no-go zone,” a 300-meter-wide “restricted zone,” and a 1,000-meter-wide “risk zone.” The risk evoked here constitutes in the potentiality for Palestinians of being shot by a zealous Israeli patrol or by one of the numerous remote-controlled machine gun set up along the wall. During a month starting on July 22, 2014, the “no-go zone” was enlarged by 3000% by the Israeli army in an attempt to conduct its ground invasion and air bombing within a simulacrum of legitimacy. 25% of the Gaza population has been thus displaced towards the sea, finding refuge in the remaining 56% of the strip that often makes Gaza being called “the densest place on earth.”

The legal fiction which consists in the creation of zones where any living being can be considered as belligerent and thus killed, is based on a manufactured sanctity of the warning act. In any

other context, such a rationale would be universally considered as threat and intimidation, which could not possibly legitimize any crime that would follow them. In the 3,000-meter-wide “no-go zone,” schools, hospitals, clinics, mosques, and houses have been systematically bombed. Furthermore, we also have to pay attention to the resources of Gaza, that feed literally and economically its population. In this regard, the agricultural area that is now within the “no-go zone” is massive, and the noxious consequences of such a situation will last for a substantial amount of time.

## GAZA AS A LABORATORY



Infrastructural and Militarized Cartography of Gaza – Made by the author (July 10, 2014)

The containment of the Gaza strip and its population implemented by architecture that materializes the unilateral blockade allows us to compare Gaza with a laboratory. In a laboratorial experiment, the ‘atmospheric’ conditions are under full control of the researcher. Similarly the conditions of life in Gaza depend almost exclusively on Israel. Food and goods are partially smuggled from Egypt or produced within Gaza, but most of them are imported from the Israeli territory. Similarly, power is imported for a small part from Egypt (15%) and used to be also partially supplied from the Gaza power cloud plant (18%),

which has however been destroyed during these last months' bombings. The rest is directly supplied by Israel, which has mastered the 'dosing tactic' consisting in finding how little it can supply without triggering a humanitarian catastrophe that would provoke international criticism. This strategic dosing, whether of food, goods, power, medical drugs, and humanitarian aid access, adopts the same logic than one of a laboratorial experiment, which says long about the consideration for the Palestinian people by the Israeli authorities.

The laboratory is also a military one. Investigations are on-going in order to understand if weaponry forbidden by the international legislation has been used by the Israeli army during the recent weeks. However, the use of flechette shells and white phosphorous has been reported during the Israeli army's "Operation Cast Lead" (December 2008 – January 2009) that killed 1,300 Palestinians in Gaza. In this regard, the research council *Forensic Architecture* directed by Eyal Weizman has been instrumental in analyzing the iconographic documents showing the effects of white phosphorous in a residential neighborhood of Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Despite the explicit questioning of architects' competence in terms of military weaponry when confronted to their report, the Israeli army "issued a declaration stating that it would cease to use white phosphorus shells in populated areas."<sup>2</sup>

## ARCHITECTURE UNDER ATTACK

As Eyal Weizman argues in his lecture sharing the same name than the research council quoted above, *Forensic Architecture* (2010), bodies in Gaza rarely die directly from the Israeli bombs, but more often from the subsequent destruction of the building where they find themselves. This distinction seems peculiar to make, but it reveals important information if we pay attention

to it. It seems legitimate that we insist on the amount of deaths and casualties caused by the siege; however, when architecture becomes a target, it multiplies the dreadful effects on the life of the local population. Collective sources of economy, of education, of health are damaged or destroyed, thus affecting tremendously the conditions of life of Gaza inhabitants. The bombing of the Gaza strip is however characterized by the amount of homes that have been destroyed or affected by it. The justification of this bombing by the Israeli army forces us to wonder what a home might be.

Privileged's imaginaries invite us to think that home is the perfect embodiment of safety. As kids we play tag and, when reaching the zone where the rules prevent us from being tagged, we scream "Home!" Later in our lives, we run away from someone in the street, reach "home," lock behind us and take the deep breath that signifies that we are safe. The necessary association of safety and home is however a luxury that many people in the world cannot afford, the Palestinians maybe less than anybody else. Many people of the West Bank see their homes raided by the IDF in the middle of the night, waking-up all inhabitants with guns in their face, then leaving with men and boys arrested until further notice. Gaza's homes do not even see the 'precautionary' presence of bodies on site but are subjected to F16 fighter jets' and drones' bombs that lead to Gaza-based journalist Mohammed Omer's dilemma: "Most difficult moment for a father: split his children in all corners of the house or all in one corner and die together?"<sup>34</sup>

How does the paradigmatic architecture of the civilian realm thus become the favored target of military bombing? The Israeli army itself asks the question: "When is a house, a home?" This architectural section poster, prepared as a propaganda kit for everyone willing to use disingenuousness to support its bombing, attempts to propagate the demagogic argument of

“human shields” that embody the national alibi of the massacre it organizes. The goal of the Israeli army consists in transforming legal statuses: from a civilian body to a “warned potential collateral damage,” and, in the case of a house, from the status of home to the one of “enemy military building.”

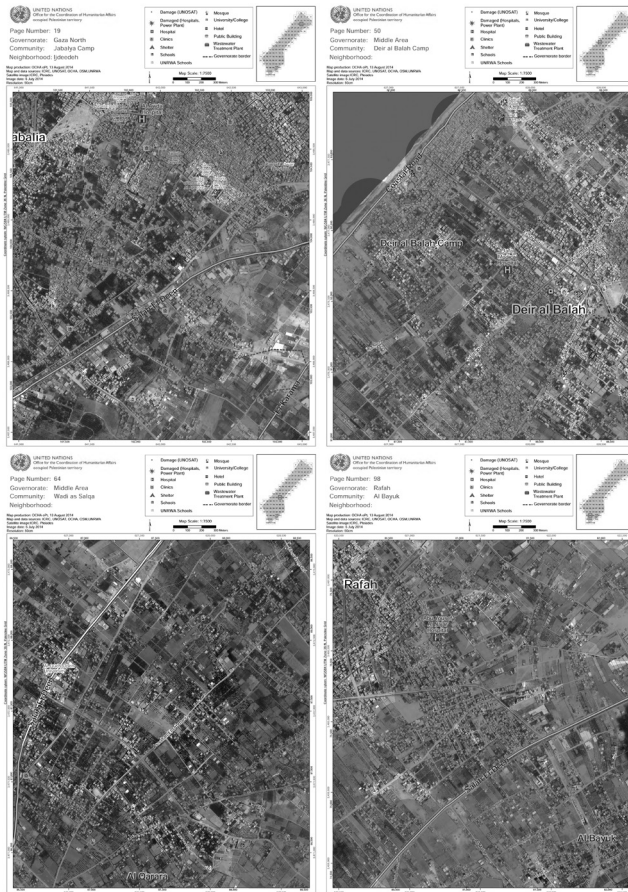
Similarly the “knock on roof” tactic has been repeatedly used as another simulacrum of legitimacy of the bombing of Palestinian homes. This tactic consists in the firing of a small explosive rocket on the roof of a targeted home, giving a couple of minutes for its inhabitants to evacuate it before a larger bomb annihilates it. There has been a particular insistence on the short amount of evacuation time that often does not allow an entire family to run out of the lethal explosion. However, arguing for the attribution of a longer time would legitimize this tactic and the legal shift it claims to achieve. A warned population is not in any way more legitimate to be killed than any other. In other words, there is nothing that an attacking army can do to change the status of civilians to a given population; only this population’s own actions can.

Through the question “What is a home?,” we aim at also considering the attack on that which is not alive. This question brings us back to a form of collective punishment favored by the Israeli army: home demolitions. The demolition of home is the destruction of a collective (whether familial, local or other) memory. Depending on the means of destruction – administrative demolition in the West Bank and East Jerusalem or bombing in Gaza – the homeowners will or will not have time to take objects and furniture with them that will help to reconstitute this collective memory, yet either way, part of it is inexorably inscribed in the walls and space of the home itself. Moreover, the act of destruction itself constitutes a violent operation that not only materially shatters this collective memory, but also turns the home literally inside out, thus making apparent that which



was only visible to family and friends. Such apparition of the private in the public realms is described by Ariella Azoulay in her essay “When a Demolished House Becomes a Public Square.”<sup>4</sup> Through it, Azoulay does not only describe the actual demolition of Palestinian homes in Gaza, but also the desacralization of their privacy by Israeli soldiers when they occupy one: she talks of the “sanctity” of the home. This sanctity is profanated by the bulldozer, the bomb, the soldier. Once again, this profanation is not much compared to the sanctity of life itself, which should be the one priority of the struggle; yet the fact that the profanation of Palestinian homes’ sanctity has been organized and implemented since 1947, it is therefore important to insist on this aspect of the militarized violence developed knowingly by the Israeli army.

# ATMOSPHERIC IMPACT OF THE BOMBINGS



Atmospheric Impact of the Bombings – Made by the author based on maps by the U.N. Office for Coordination of Human Affairs in the Palestinian Territories (August 15, 2014)

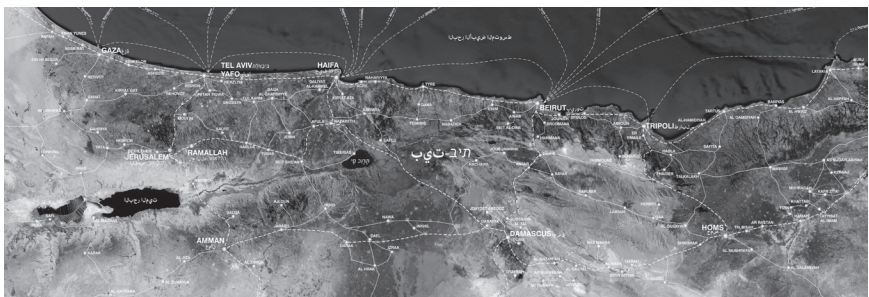
The various cartographic inventories of the bombing of these last months in Gaza often fail to illustrate the fact that a bombing is not confined to the violent physical destruction of a localized building, it also corresponds to an atmospheric volume of impact. The map above considers each bombing's epicenter as mapped by OCHA, and attributes a 200-meter-radius area around it to illustrate the atmospheric impact. Everyone living inside one of these red areas has been experiencing at least one (often more)

bombing in her/his immediate proximity. These four maps were selected for their representative characteristics in that some areas of the Gaza strip have been so heavily and systematically bombed that their maps would have been fully red, while a few other areas were more sporadically bombed, in particular in the less densely populated zones where the former Israeli settlements were situated before they were evacuated in 2005. The first aspect of the atmospheric impact that the Israeli army bombing has been having is the most immediate one: sound. The sound of bombs is haunting as it materializes a stop in time, a wait from which, one always realizes much too late that a bomb will explode nearby. For a month, the sound of bombs falling and exploding has been Gaza inhabitant's daily sonic landscape. The sound of bombs inevitably triggers fear. Who could escape from fear when knowing that a bomb has fallen less than 200 meters away from where they live? This is the fundamental principle of terrorism: its violence relies as much in the deaths and destruction it violently triggers as in its atmospheric effect on people situated nearby and/or who can identify to those who have been killed. We continue to attribute this notion of terrorism only to marginal armed groups that organize localized violent attacks on certain Western civilian population, but we miss to situate terrorism in the military operations of the Israeli and US armies that brings terror to another scale thanks to their hegemonic weaponry.

The third aspect goes back to the strictly physical aspect of the bombings' damage. An explosion essentially consists in a suddenly liberated volume of energy whose power of destruction is proportional to its distance (and therefore to its time) from its epicenter. The fact that the surrounding buildings of each bombed building are not part of the inventories does not mean that they did not suffer from severe internal damages (walls destroyed, windows blew out, etc.), which necessarily affected

their inhabitants in their health (from the potential cuts of a blew out window's glass for example), as well as in their daily function. These bombings necessarily impacted the infrastructure of the city: roads, of course, but also water pipes, electrical wires — although the power plant having been bombed, power was 'already' scarce — and sewers that strongly affected drinking waters and triggered diseases among the Gaza population. The four and final aspect of the bombings' atmospheric impact that these maps attempt to illustrate is an affect at the scale of local communities. When living under continuous occupation, and now under siege, one certainly develops relationships to one's neighborhood that link members of this local community in a much tighter manner than the one we can experience in large Western cities. These 200-meter-radius areas therefore also attempts to represent how the death of a family, or the destruction of a given business or facility undeniably affect the social life of the concerned neighborhood, triggering sorrow, anger and mourning.

## CONCLUSION: CRITIQUING “SOLUTIONS”



بيت-بيت (Bayt): Cartographic Manifesto Against Partitions and Borders – Map by the author (July 28, 2014)

Fatalism is a luxury we cannot afford when it comes to the Palestinian struggle for existence. In this regard, our critique has to address as much the present conditions of occupation

and siege, as the so-called “solutions” proposed by various entities. Admittedly, the creation of a Palestinian state would have spectacular effects at short term. The evacuation of the 500,000 Israeli settlers currently living in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in violation of the article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention would certainly be one of them. However, this scenario should not be seen as anything else than the perpetuation of the logic hidden behind the 1993 Oslo Accords. The Palestinian Authority and Ramallah bourgeoisie would continue to gain wealth and control over the territory that is left to them, the five millions of Palestinian refugees currently living in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon would still not be granted their right to return to the land where their families lived before 1948, the main Palestinian territory (West Bank and East Jerusalem) would be geographically separated from Gaza, the State of Israel would be declared a “Jewish state,” thus denying full citizenship to Palestinians living on it, and the various war criminals of these last decades would never be judged for their crimes.

We should therefore fight for the so-called “one-state” solution, allowing the former and current population of Palestine – understood as a historical region here – to live on one land with full citizenship for all. Whatever this new state’s name might be, it is nevertheless hard to imagine different governance than the ones we can observe in many countries of the world, thus perpetuating forms of racism, xenophobia (towards African migrants for instance), and religious schisms. Maybe then should we dream bigger and think of a borderless region that would go from Turkey to Egypt like in Raja Shehadeh’s novella *2037*, or a “no-state solution,” as Sophia Azeb argues, where lines are no longer walls that separate but, rather, roads that link.<sup>5</sup>

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Forensic Architecture in collaboration with SITU Research, “Case: White Phosphorous,” in Forensic Architecture, Centre for Research Architecture, Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London, *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (April 25, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Omer (@Mogaza), Twitter, July 13, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “When a Demolished House Becomes a Public Square,” in Ann Laura Stoler (ed), *Imperial Debris*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Raja Shehadeh, 2037: *Le Grand Bouleversement*, Paris: Galaade, 2011 / Archipelago, ‘The “No-State Solution’: Power of Imagination for the Palestinian Struggle with Sophia Azeb,” Conversation with the author (April 28, 2014)

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