##

Urban Warfare: The Case of Gaza’s Infrastructure.

By: Hammad Jabr. April 26th, 2024.

**Executive Summary**

This report examines urbicide, the ongoing deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli authorities. Since the onset of Gaza’s siege and occupation in 2007, Israel has repeatedely targeted civilian infrastructures, most notably, water and sanitation, housing, and power to prevent Palestinians from meeting their basic needs and services.

Urbicide as a tool of urban warfare is aimed at disrupting the public lives of urban populations, creating mass destruction, devastation, and displacement. This is particularly evident in the Israeli blockade and siege of the Gaza Strip where in each of its hostilities, it has committed acts of urbicide through airstrikes, bombardments, and other warfare tactics that target civilian infrastructure.

Israeli assaults have caused devastating material, physical, and humanitarian consequences on the living conditions of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Urbicide have led to the destruction of water and sanitation infrastructures such as water treatment plants and pipes which has forced many Palestinians to live without clean and safe water. The destruction of homes has led to the displacement, loss of life, and psychological trauma of thousands, leaving many unable to live safely. Additionally, damage to power infrastructure undermined Palestinian access to services such as cooking, safe drinking, treatment, and health services that rely on electricity. Urbicide highlights the importance of looking at these consequences as systematic, and as devastating both in the short and the long run.

This report calls for accountability for the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and advocates for international efforts to address urbicide as a violation of human rights. Israel, as the occupying power, is significantly complicit in urbicide and must be held to account. Furthermore, addressing urbicide requires urban reconstruction through local and international aid that meets the needs of and centers the Palestinian communities affected.

# **Israeli Blockade and Siege: Context for Urbicide**

Urbicide is the result of a host of military tactics that systematically and strategically destroy the urban systems necessary to sustain the organization and public life of an urban population.[[1]](#footnote-1)Urbicide not only results in mass destruction and displacement but also ensures that destruction and displacement continue well after the immediate spectacular moments of war. Although urbicide is not be explicitly recognized illegal under international law, it is important to note that international humanitarian, criminal, and human rights laws do prohibit the deliberate targeting and destruction of civilian infrastructure. For instance, article 53 of international humanitarian law “explicitly prohibits the Occupying Power from destroying real or personal property belonging to private individuals, the State, public authorities, or social organizations, except when such destruction is absolutely necessary for military operations.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, actions resulting in such destruction and harm to civilian populations, including urbicide, are prohibited under international law.

Within the Israeli blockade and siege on the Gaza Strip in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which has been accompanied by a series of wars since the start of the siege, most notably the 2023 Israel-Palestine war, Israeli occupation forces continually engage in urbicide through their infrastructural warfare. Urbicide entails deliberate destruction through airstrikes, bombardments, and carpet bombing on vital sites such as hospitals, schools, and places of worship. Most recently, the Israeli hostilities of Gaza following a Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7 forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians out of their homes. According to Gaza's Ministry of Public Works and Housing, 43% of housing units in Gaza have been either destroyed or damaged since the start of hostilities.[[3]](#footnote-3) These hostilities are not confined to this moment; urbicide has an immediate history as a tactic of forced development preceding October 7. For example, in the 2014 conflict, over 60,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, while in 2021, approximately 1,150 homes were destroyed, along with numerous schools and health facilities.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Military tactics like urbicide not only result in the material destruction of the basic needs of an urban population but also create conditions where communities' abilities to rebuild post-urban warfare are undermined. This includes the bombing of urban infrastructures (e.g. schools and hospitals) and the deliberate obstruction of efforts to bring in essential goods and resources needed for reconstruction.[[5]](#footnote-5) By denying access to building materials, medical supplies, and other necessities, those responsible for urbicide prolong the suffering of civilians and prevent them from rebuilding their lives. This strategy perpetuates a cycle of devastation, where communities cannot recover from the initial destruction, leading to further deterioration of living conditions and infrastructure. Urbicide, therefore, is both the immediate spectacular destruction, and the slow forms of infrastructural violence that persist.

Every aspect of urban life, such as inhabiting, going to school or work, and shopping, becomes impossible by destroying urban infrastructures. Residential areas, for example, are reduced to rubble, with homes destroyed or severely damaged by airstrikes and bombardments.[[6]](#footnote-6) The remains of once-vibrant communities lie in ruins, displacing thousands of families and leaving them without shelter. The point

 is: urbicide goes beyond immediate material destruction to perpetuating long- term human suffering that disrupts civilians’ public life.

# **Why Urbicide to understand Gaza?**

What urbicide does is that it is deliberately disrupts infrastructures that constitutes necessary for urban populations ability to maintain and sustain their lives, with housing as the clearest example. For example, attacks by Israel on targets within Gaza have destroyed or damaged 62 percent of all homes in Gaza, equivalent to 290,820 housing units, and more than a million people are without homes. As of April 17, 2024, at least 33,899 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, and 76,664 Palestinians were injured, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Urbicide directs our attention to the systematic, deliberate material consequences of urban warfare rather than engaging in the work of untangling intent and the narratives propagated by a state known for spreading misinformation.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Israeli military systematically targets and destroys civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including dual-use systems, electrical and power transmission grids, media networks, and telecommunication infrastructure.[[9]](#footnote-9) They justify these actions through the dehumanization of Palestinians rendering all of Gaza targetables. To comprehend the impact of such rhetoric, it is essential to examine the tangible violence created by urbicide. Central to this violence is the intentional and targeted destruction of housing, water and sanitation, and power infrastructures, often located in areas densely populated by Palestinian civilians.

However, urbicide does not just include the physical and material destruction of urban infrastructure during military warfare. It highlights the devastation and post-war destruction in the Gaza Strip caused by the challenges of reconstructing and maintaining what urban military warfare has destroyed. These challenges encompass material and physical infrastructures and vital aspects of urban living such as employment, safety and security, education, and access to essential resources like community, food, and healthcare.[[10]](#footnote-10)

### **Urbicide: Water and Sanitation**

Take into account the story of Imm Mahmoud, who, on 8 Nov 2023, was taking refuge at Alif Elementary Boys' School, run by the United Nations refugee agency. She testimonies what the lack of access to water brought to herself and her family "We have no water, no sanitation, no running sewage system," "With this lack of basic hygiene, neither the adults nor the children are comfortable." "Children have been suffering from diarrhoea, coughs and colds from the pollution and swimming in the sea," she said. "But what do you expect them to do? They have to find a way to release their energy. Being cooped up in a school can lead to a lot of yelling and fights with their families."[[11]](#footnote-11) Mahmoud's account shows the consequences of the lack of access to clean water in Gaza, where basic necessities like hygiene, health, and comfort become compromised.

In each of Israel's assaults on the Gaza Strip over the past decade, bombardments have targeted critical water infrastructure, including main power stations, wastewater treatment plants, and water networks.[[12]](#footnote-12) This damage must be recognized as systematic, as it continuously seeks to deny Palestinians their rights and access to water, disrupt Palestinian livelihoods in the Gaza Strip, and undermine their resilience, safety, and well-being.

Most recently, during the 2023 Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians' humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by the targeting of water and sanitation infrastructure. This assault, combined with the ongoing siege, has left a significant proportion of Gaza's population without access to clean water. Before the 2023 assaults erupted, the Gaza Strip relied on three vital pipelines from Israel for its water supply, accounting for 13% of its total water intake. However, on October 9th, 2023, the Israeli government abruptly shut off these pipelines, further aggravating the water crisis.[[13]](#footnote-13)Although two of these pipelines resumed operation by mid-October, reports of severe leakage issues emerged, with one pipeline leaking an alarming 70% of its water.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Moreover, during the hostilities between November 4th and 5th, 2023, Israeli bombs targeted seven critical water facilities across Gaza, including reservoirs in densely populated areas such as Gaza City, Jabalia refugee camp, and Rafah in the south.

As a result of this assault, as of October 2023, Palestinians in Gaza had lost around 97% of their average daily water requirement to meet their basic needs for drinking, cooking, and hygiene. The average water consumption for all purposes had also decreased to two to three liters per day per person as of November 2023, well below the WHO emergency minimum of 7.5L.[[15]](#footnote-15) This ongoing water crisis is the result of urbicide- the deliberate attacks on water infrastructure as part of Israeli assaults on the Strip, which has persisted for years.

In 2008, during the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip, known as Operation Cast Lead, water infrastructure suffered devastating impacts, significantly affecting the population's access to drinking water. Around 112 wells were damages, 74 destroyed, with one example the destruction of the El Edara well, resulting in the complete loss of running water for approximately 25,000 people. Report contends that the systematic destruction of water facilities in this offensive has left over 500,000 Gazans without access to clean running water, deprived Palestinians of access to water, and prevented them from sustaining their livelihoods.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Thus, deliberately targeting and destroying essential water infrastructure, undermines their ability to maintain their livelihoods, including their water and sanitation needs. The point here is that the fundamental rights of Palestinian peoples cannot be fulfilled without shedding light on and accounting for the devastating impacts of urbicide on water infrastructure as systematic.

### **Urbicide: Housing**

The deliberate destruction of homes in Gaza by the Israeli military is also an element of urbicide. Similar to the targeting of water infrastructures, the Israeli army disproportionately harms Palestinian civilians by demolishing homes where people live thus disrupting their day-to-day lives. The significant impact of this destruction on a human level must be noticed, along with the material impacts. However, why is that? This is because “a home it has so much more than a structure: It is a repository of past experiences and future dreams, of memories of births, deaths, marriages, and intimate moments with our loved ones amid neighbors and a familiar landscape. The idea of home brings comfort and gives meaning to people's lives. The denial of a person's humanity and dignity is its destruction”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The damage to people's housing in the Gaza Strip leads to immediate consequences like displacement, shortage of safe and secure housing, and a lack of safe housing. Palestinians forced to flee their homes during the assault endure a cycle of poverty, instability, and insecurity—the displaced struggle to maintain employment and access essential services such as food and water without stable housing.[[18]](#footnote-18) The uncertainty surrounding their living conditions post-destruction can foster a sense of insecurity, where living in the present becomes the norm, and planning for the future remains uncertain.

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Mr. Balakrishnan Rajapopal contends that since the start of the Israeli 2023 targeted attacks within Gaza, Palestinians have endured deliberate and systematic destruction of their homes. For example, Israel have destroyed or damaged 45 percent of all housing units in the Gaza strip, internally displaced about 1.5 million people and killed over 10,000 people, including over 80 UN staff. Over 25,000 people have sustained wounds in the airstrikes. Reports indicate that sixty-seven percent of all fatalities are children or women. Additionally, more than 2,300 people – including 1300 children – are reported missing, with most of them likely trapped under the rubble.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On top of this material impact of urbicide, the human impact of urbicide is evident in its effects on how people negatively experience their lives, memories, and the meanings that they attach to their homes in the Gaza Strip Strip. As Yaqeen Baker, a Palestinian mother living in Gaza, on the loss of her family's home in the 2023 assaults, puts it, "There once was a small home in the city of Jabalia in northern Gaza filled with love and life, established by the sweat of a young man seeking stability for his family. It was a precious kingdom, embracing you with its warmth as soon as you walked inside. Every corner held a memory, and every tile told a story." [[20]](#footnote-20) Testimonies like this from those displaced by the hostilities shed the light on how the human impacts of urbicide, where homes as repositories of identity and belonging are also lost, are just as important as the physical.

On another instance, by looking at the 2014 Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip, reports show that much of the human and material impacts of destruction witnessed in the Gaza Strip in the 2023 Israeli assault is not unprecedented. In fact, in each of Israel's assaults on the Gaza Strip, the systematic destruction of homes has been a common strategy. At the height of the 2014 assaults, approximately from July to August, nearly 500,000 people, 28 percent of the population, were displaced. According to a survey conducted by the IDP Working Group, chaired by UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), in 2015, a year from mid-August to December following the 2014 assaults, they found that some 11,000 housing units suffered destruction and 6,800 housing units endured severe damage from the 2014 hostilities; combined, almost 18,000 homes became uninhabitable.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The deliberate destruction of homes in Gaza by the Israeli military is not merely an assault on physical structures; it represents a systematic attack on the core of Palestinian existence. From the demolition of family residences to the displacement of entire communities, these acts of destruction perpetuate cycles of instability and Palestinians. Urbicide on housing leaves Palestinians displaced and insecure, unable to rebuild amidst the ruins of their former homes.

**Urbicide: Power**

Accessing power is linked to communities to well-being; as it enables them to meet their daily needs and services. Reliable and persistent power supply ensures that communities can have lighting, heating, and cooking facilities, which are fundamental for daily living. Moreover, access to services such as education, healthcare, water, and sanitation is heavily dependent on power.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, Israeli military operations systematically target Gaza's power infrastructure during hostilities, causing extensive damage and harming to Palestinians wellbeing and livelihoods.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The systematic targeting of power infrastructures also extends to Israel’s imposition of blockades and restrictions on fuel importation in each hostility. This fuel is necessary for maintaining and operating power plants and generators.[[24]](#footnote-24) These actions constitute urbicide as they deliberately exacerbate the challenges faced by the Palestinian population in accessing reliable electricity. The deliberate disruption of fuel imports leads to blackouts and further strains an already fragile infrastructure, impacting essential services and worsening living conditions for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.[[25]](#footnote-25)

During the 2014 hostilities in the Gaza Strip, Israeli shellfire knocked out the Gaza Strip's only electrical power plant, leading to a complete shutdown of electricity production.[[26]](#footnote-26) Palestinians had to rely on power generators to meet their essential services and needs, such as powering lights in schools and homes, despite encountering problems with using the generators for lighting. The deliberate shutdown of the Strip's power plant meant that schools lost access to water for washing hands, their ability to store food without it getting rotten, and keeping latrines clean.[[27]](#footnote-27) The impacts produced by deliberately attacking power infrastructure in the Gaza Strip are to harm Palestinians systematically and to prevent them from maintaining their well-being.

Urbicide on power indirectly endangers the lives of many Palestinians: during

the 2023 Israeli hostilities in the Gaza Strip pushed Palestinians into a complete energy blackout. Israel cut off the electricity supply it provided the Strip with and blocked the entry of any fuel. As a result, bringing in any fuel for the Gaza power plant or the fuel-run generators became impossible. Hostilities directly targeted energy sources and distribution networks and hindered maintenance efforts, leading to permanent damage and prolonged outages.[[28]](#footnote-28) The power deficit caused by this significantly disrupted Palestinians' access to essential services needed to maintain their well-being, particularly health.[[29]](#footnote-29)

However, why shed light on the health of power? Without power, hospitals cannot function. Because electricity is an essential requirement for the functioning of any healthcare facility, hospitals cannot deliver clinical care to patients, accept new patients, or safely transfer patients to other healthcare facilities. Blackouts in Hospitals pose an alarming threat to the lives of patients, including premature and newborn babies and those in intensive care units.[[30]](#footnote-30) For instance, on November 17th, 2023, more than 20 patients lost their lives at Gaza's Al-Shifa Hospital due to power cuts, according to a statement from the Palestinian health ministry. The hospital, which had been grappling with fuel shortages as a result of Israeli refusal to allow fuel for the hospital, became non-operational, resulting in the tragic loss of lives.[[31]](#footnote-31) This shows how the loss of lives at the hospitals because of targeting power production in the Gaza Strip is systemic; it is direct harm to civilians where access to power is maintaining one's life.

Through urbicide, Gaza's power infrastructure is systematically targeted, including bombing power plants and imposing fuel blockades. Essential services like healthcare suffer, with hospitals unable to function without electricity. Without addressing systematic attacks on power in the Gaza Strip, Palestinians cannot meet their power needs for stability and well-being.

# **Summary**

What this report has shown is that Urbicide is systematically used to disrupt Palestinian livelihoods. Through the deliberate destruction of infrastructure essential for Palestinians' urban needs, such as water, housing, and power, it creates conditions where Palestinians' ability to live during and after warfare is undermined and diminished. While it leaves behind tremendous material impacts on the strip's civil infrastructure, such as the number of houses destroyed in a year, the human impacts are also devastating. Urbicide in Gaza extends beyond physical destruction; it results in the erasure of Palestinians' lived experiences, emotions, and memories, all of which are integral components of their existence.

The significance lies in the recurring matter; when Palestinians in the strip are subjected to the same material and human impacts year after year of hostilities, urbicide becomes systematic. It has remained a strategy in Israel’s doctrine of Israel to erase Palestinians to prevent them from meeting their basic needs in life. Whether in its 2014 hostiles on the strip or in the 2023 assaults, the goal in these assaults has been the same: to destroy Palestinian civilian infrastructure deliberately and to prevent them from maintaining their livelihoods by making them insecure.

# **Combating urbicide, recentering life and livelihoods in urban reconstruction**

While urbicide inflicts extensive damage on infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, various local and international initiatives can be implemented to enhance Palestinians' quality of life and safeguard their well-being in the face of its consequence.

1. To ensure accountability for the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructures in the Gaza Strip, it is vital that international bodies, including as the United Nations Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), prioritize transparency and accountability. These bodies should spearhead efforts to document the impact and scope of urbicide on the ground from October 7th to the present.
2. Advocate for local and international conventions or agreements that address urbicide as a violation of international human rights. As of now, there is no internationally recognized law specifically addressing urbicide as a violation of human rights.
3. Israel's complicity in the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, along with the support provided by other states through funding for the Israeli military (e.g., the U.S.A., Spain, the U.K., and Canada), necessitates accountability for Palestinians affected by these actions. This includes compensation for loss of life, property, and livelihoods.
4. The responsibility of other states in the systematic atrocities committed against the Gaza Strip must be thoroughly examined. Critical research by local, national, and international organizations, including Amnesty International and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, is essential to assess the extent of military support provided by Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. to Israel during hostilities that harm Palestinians.
5. The reconstruction of Gaza is intertwined with the long-term sustainability of Gaza the Strip's and its population. International aid and bodies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), must prioritize efforts to combat the systemic targeting of the Strip's infrastructure and facilitate the rebuilding of Gaza's vital structures.
6. While international aid is needed for the reconstruction of Gaza’s infrastructure, it is crucial to uphold Palestinians' sovereignty and self-determination; reconstruction projects should be guided by the aspirations and needs of the Palestinian people. This could be done by engaging local communities and authorities to lead rebuilding efforts funded by local and international aid organizations. Such efforts will help foster a sense of ownership and agency among Palestinians and strengthen Palestinians resilience against the challenges posed by the Israeli occupation on their urban environment.
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