

Draft

Zones of Conflict: Gaza

Eyal Sivan and Eyal Weizman in conversation

Eyal Weizman: the destruction and the killing are on a huge scale. The problem for us critically engaged in war and conflict is that there is an assumption that if we exposed the level of atrocity and violence, bring it into heightened visibility, there would be an equally forceful, responsible, political public reaction that transferred outrage into a political action directed at stopping atrocities. But what if outrage itself becomes part of the logic of the application of power here? What if – inverting the logic of media and terror -- it is the very depicting of this violence as a catastrophe – that plays to the hands of this time -- a terrorist state? From the last two major attacks it was involved in, Lebanon and Gaza, it became clear that the Israeli military, realizing that it cannot fight counterinsurgency and urban war, opts to terrorize the population into pressuring its elected government to comply with the state's security vision. Thus the level of destruction, the dead children, the exploding schools and the overflowing hospitals are thus not “collateral” to Israel's attack on Hamas, but the central part of Israel's strategy to convince the Palestinians that they are defeated and that resistance is futile. So Israel needs spectacular violence in its relation to the Palestinians and the world – the latter should acquiesce to its ultimatums to deploy less it generated an even larger catastrophe. We are faced with the mediatization and amplification of rage used in continuation with a state logic that seeks to demonstrate its punishing violence. If this is the case – should we even think about calling outrage? Should we find new ways of opposition?

against the saturation of images of collapse and catastrophe, should we call for a strategy of withdrawal, a withdrawal of the image and of information? Or maybe there is a way to engage in critical debate while taking this paradox into account, deal with its proliferation, in relation of a search for political transformation *vis-à-vis* an event? Should we absolutely ignore that event, or should we contribute to its hyper-visibility?

I think that we must initially, rather coldly examine the terms that are being employed: firstly, the ‘War on Gaza’, which implies the territorialisation of that war, as if Gaza was a sovereign, coherent, legitimate zone, and not a fragment of occupied Palestine, under a state of siege. We must not accept the language of the violence imposed. We hear of these words all the time, they have a utilitarian logic, whereas they are terms which need to be explained and reproduced as the categories of power itself. Another problem is that by heightening the visibility of this violence we may

inadvertently contribute to the singularity of this event, which is in effect the last blow in a long process of attacks on Palestinian refugees.

Eyal Sivan: I am very happy to have had an introduction, because I must admit that after spending the time of the war in Israel shooting [a film] in Jaffa, I am quite confused. I was trying to make a film about the colonisation of the symbol of Palestine, and to reveal in order to reflect on t the fact that the only common symbol for the people that are living in this place called Palestine or Israel is the orange. I was trying to make a film about this commonality, this being together, which is in fact what Palestine is was. And it was not a zone of conflict, but *became* a zone of conflict. The few thousand Palestinians in Jaffa have relatives in Gaza, because the refugees in Gaza are from Jaffa and from all those places that were under threat of the missiles from Gaza. There was a map published in the Israeli papers s on the first day of the attack, which showed the range of the missiles coming from Gaza. And strange enough it was also a map of the places were the refugees now living in Gaza are originated from. They are the same places attacked by the Palestinian rockets, it is in some way an act of return. All those places are the places where the people who are under attack in Gaza have come from. And at the same time I was there in Jaffa trying to make a film on something that doesn't exist.

We have the possibility to reflect, and almost the need to understand. For us, all that's going on is a question of denial. Denial is the nature of those populations that are under attack, which is not only the denial of the status of the refugees, but also the fact that there is or was something that is Palestine.

And so within this wordless, speechless position, while I was working in the last twenty years in that zone, the zone of conflict shifted, *I* became the zone of conflict.

Eyal Weizman: indeed what is not discussed in context of this war is that the violence is directed at refugee. This is a part of an ongoing "war on refugees", the [provisional] culmination of a historical process that started with the ethnic cleansing of southern Palestine in the fall of 1948.

I think that "war on refugee" is a distinct type of military/political/economical action that is afflicted on Palestinian refugees and which is undertaken through both destruction and construction. The refugees are managed through a combination of violence, "generosity" [after all the refugee and the history of humanitarianism intersect very clearly] -- "threat"...and "reward"

The "war on refugees" attempts to undo the "refugee" as a political category, because this category is perceived as **destructive** and **nihilist**. In the context of Palestine, but also in many other conflicts worldwide, the status of "refugee" is a manifestation for the unresolved and even for the un-resolvability of the conflict – without – that is -- major political transformations. The demand for return is the one thing that in Israeli eyes threatens the very existence of the Israeli political/colonial order.

"The war on refugees" is applied in two interrelated ways: direct military force of destruction and killing, that are often, if not always followed by **development attempts to decamp** the refugees by the transformation of their habitat. This process of "development" based on welfare and architecture–

is an attempt to address an “unresolvable” political issue with a series of existing socio-economic means or even urban solutions.

In the context of the “war on refugees” we can think about the six-day occupation not only in territorial terms, but as the handing over of the management of the Palestinian refugee problem from Jordan and Egypt to Israeli. In fact, between, ‘49 and ‘67 Israeli ambassadors to different states in the world and the UN did not stop to complain about the fact that Palestinian refugees were not rehoused and absorbed, both politically and urbanistically, as citizens and into the fabric of cities. The occupation gave Israel the opportunity to show what it meant all these years. And indeed in fact the first plans that were drawn up after the 67 occupation of Gaza and the West bank were not for Jewish settlements, which came only later. The initial plans were for refugee cities, which would be built for the Gaza refugees and move them into areas near Hebron, in the West Bank, into specially designed cities that would undo the collective experience and the refugee status. It had a behaviourist logic to it: if only the Palestinians could live better, have better conditions, they would forget their political struggle. It was an attempt to address a political issue by the means of architecture. But these did not work out for various reasons, as there was internal conflict within the Israeli government.

The attempts to undo the refugee took much more of a violent turn few years later: it was Sharon’s idea, the Haussmannisation of the refugee camps that took place between 1971 and 1972, the creation of a new urban form through the destruction of built matter. It was always the perception of the Israeli security apparatus of the refugee camp as a rabble of people and materials – material to be designed reconfigured to be better controlled and so that the politics of resistance could be designed out. the refugee camps were not only seen as the location from which resistance was offered, but the urban condition that bred this very resistance. Sharon wanted to eliminate the camps once and for all.

The spectre of the reconstruction of Gaza was present in Israeli discussion from the beginning of its attack, it was discussed simultaneously. We will destroy and international aid will rebuild. Without this understanding that international aid will clean up this mess – I doubt destruction would be allowed on this scale. It definitively didn’t happen on this scale when it was Israel that had to foot the bill for the cleaning. The territorial withdrawal allowed the increase of violence and destruction.

We need to underscore the continuity of destruction and construction, and to see those not as separate actions but as continuous ones that amount to the reconfiguration of the built environment – the way it is reconfigured addresses what is perceived as the political category of the refugee. And the category of the refugee goes beyond the immediate context of the actions of Israel; it is more generally a destructive category, the refugee is that which goes against and threatens the logic of state and borders, threatens the order of power. The refugee is that element which will both delegitimise and destroy the state. Although officially most Arab states support and promote the maintenance of this category of refugees – the very existence of the

refugee also threatens their political orders. This might help connect this attack to the larger and ongoing "war on Palestinian refugees" in a wider historical/geographical context - from Zarqa [Amman 1970], Jebalya, Rafah and Shati [Gaza 1972], Sabra and Shatila [Lebanon 1982], Jenin and Balata [West Bank 2002] to Nahr el Bared [Lebanon 2007], and further to the kind of violence **afflicted on** refugee camps in the DRC at present.

This is also exemplified in various discussions that we have been hearing in the past years, for example within the different agencies that are dealing with Palestinian refugees. There has been many recent calls to dismantle UNRWA as the agency that supposedly "perpetuates" the refugee problems by handing refugee cards to decedent of the people who themselves were transferred. The political, verbal, attack on UNRWA is strangely mirrored by the fact of military attacks against its facilities in Gaza.

Eyal Sivan:

And we also talk about the *resolution* of conflict, and if we are able to think about the figure of the refugees we can consider that the recent attack is an attempt to solve the Palestinian refugees problem. When you consider as the solution the notion of peace, peace becomes the solution also to the problem of the refugee, the refugee is not anymore a problem, while a resolution to the notion of the refugee also calls for a leaving of the refuge and a-coming back, it demands that the moment of peace be peaceful. I believe that we should think about exactly this element: why the refugee notion was not raised. Who are those people that are under attack-? And remember that part of the exposure of the Gaza attack is also a denial of the region of the conflict, which is the original war crime which is the ethnic cleansing and annexation of Palestine. Not identifying who are the people under attack allows the act of denial of the very beginning of the conflict, which is 1948 Palestine.

Eyal Weizman: In that sense, when we think about the question of reconstruction this is what we hear constantly: a few days into the war, a big meeting in the UAE was held, and the first billion was already promised, the second billion is now also coming. This is not necessarily a problem and its consequences could indeed be positive, definitively to many families whose livelihood will be saved, but how is this money going to be spent and what is the politics of reconstruction is a question of long term consequences? We must be tuned to that. There are many ways of construction and the problem has a planning dimension to it.

In some bad examples reconstruction – namely when foreign aid is given for isolated housing clusters that fragment and scatter the spatial and historical continuity of the refugee camps – disrupts the refugeehood as a political and historical experience -- these attempts to improve, to transform the built environment in which refugees live could be part of that attempt to undo the refugee as a political identity, i.e to depoliticise the refugee problem.

In 1951, for the first time the residents of a tent encampment on the beach of Gaza were the first ones to receive pre-fabricated homes. people finally move into them, but not without controversy, this resistance to transformation, the constant suspicion of refugees against improvement of their habitat, - rather than the fact of not actually allowing for any transformation (there is finally always an improvement) that keeps alive the refugee as a political category. UNRWA builds extensions to refugee camps in a way that keeps the

community intact. Other agencies are far less sensitive to these nuances, or else intentionally attempt to de-refuge the refugee. If one understands that logic, one can see the current situation differently. This calls for a nuanced and urban thinking that is tuned to the communities that have been under such brutal and traumatizing attack and not only seeing reconstruction according to the Hamas/Fatah divide.

What we want to leave you with is the non-obviousness of reconstruction. This does not mean that building homes for refugees is by definition a bad thing, that improving the condition on the ground would necessarily depoliticise this political subjectivity and identity. But it is a problem that needs to be thought through socially and architecturally.
