

cityscapes

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KHAN YUNIS, GAZA - DECEMBER 4: Palestinian citizens inspect the destruction caused by air strikes on their homes on December 04, 2023 in Khan Yunis, Gaza. Israel steps up military operations in Gaza after a sustained truce between Hamas and Israel did not hold further than a week despite diplomatic talks and captives released.

BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE RUBBLE:

the death, destruction and rise of Arab cities

DEEN SHARP investigates “urbicide”—the destruction of entire cities, the use of the built-environment in oppressive militarisation, and the development and securitisation of planned urban space—across the so-called Middle East.

On the 16th of April 2023, a military projectile exploded in the courtyard of my home in Khartoum, blowing a large hole through the exterior wall and exposing my neighbour’s toilet. It was day two of the war between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in Sudan, and in a stroke of sheer luck, my family and I were all out of the country. The Sudan and Khartoum we left are no more; what we thought was a brief holiday from our home has turned into a more permanent exile, with our former neighbourhood now occupied by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), derogatorily known as the Janjaweed.

Although Sudan has a long history of overlapping and continuous warfare, its urban centres have frequently acted as havens for those fleeing conflict from within the country, as well as from neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Chad and even Syria. When the war broke out last April, many who had already fled hostilities suddenly found the violence of war displacing them once again.

“Before the current war, many from surrounding rural areas had fled violent conflict two or three years

ago, and sought shelter in schools, public buildings and universities in the city,” said Will Carter, Sudan country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), describing the current and unprecedented devastation of the town of Al Janaynah (a city in West Darfur).

Using the current outbreak of war as an opportunity to expel communities often deemed to be from rival political and ethnic groups, the RSF is repeating a pattern throughout the country, and the devastation has been absolute. With entire cities destroyed and over 10 million people forced from their homes, Sudan has the highest number of internally displaced people in the world.

My house was in the neighbourhood of Amarat in the heart of Khartoum, just across from Khartoum International Airport, which—being the location of the first eruption of conflict in this war—is now a series of burnt-out shells. Like many of Khartoum’s neighbourhoods, Amarat has been ransacked and taken over by the RSF. Infiltrating the city’s homes and alleyways, the RSF militia’s success against the national armed force (SAF) has been due, in part, to its ability to conduct urban warfare. Meanwhile, the SAF—to little military utility—uses jets to bomb its own capital.

This war is not being waged in the rural hinterlands of Sudan’s vast landscape, but rather in its urban centres: Khartoum, Nyala and El-Fasher. My few friends who remain in the city send videos depicting dystopian scenes of an empty cityscape accompanied by sounds of birdsong mixed with sporadic gunfire and artillery shells.

The millions who have fled are not just leaving a place to which they have deep emotional and historical ties, but also, in most cases, their family’s principal financial asset. Unsurprisingly, departure is a torturous decision for many. Mahmoud is a young Sudanese man whose future, like so many, the war has destroyed. When the conflict began, I pleaded with him over WhatsApp to leave Khartoum as soon as possible. He insisted that he had to stay with his brother in Riyadh to protect their family’s property. “If I leave, my family will have to start from zero,” he lamented.

Even displacement has become a luxury many in Sudan cannot afford. As the war dragged into its sixth month, Mahmoud ran out of options. The RSF had taken over his neighbourhood, and as a Masalit (an ethnic group that the RSF had “ethnically cleansed” in Darfur), it was becoming impossible for Mahmoud to stay. Still, equally, he had no easy options of where to go. Finally, he left his family home, now riddled with bullet holes. Although he made it out alive from Khartoum, robbed and assaulted on his journey, his search for safety continues.

Increasingly, contemporary urban warfare is placing civilian urban spaces on the frontline of battlefields. Armies that in the past would have fought in trenches and across fields now do so in urban homes, schools, hospitals and public spaces transformed into battlefields. This urbanisation of violent conflict has been a steadily growing phenomenon, and one that has impacted the Arab world with particular ferocity.

Over the past thirty years, in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Sudan and Palestine-Israel, we have witnessed the destruction of entire cities as well as the oppressive militarisation and securitisation of urban space. In preparation for war or its actualisation, concrete barriers, checkpoints and gated communities cut up and segment the region’s cities, and surveillance technologies permeate almost every corner. There are

few pedestrian-friendly areas, reducing the opportunity for “urban accidents”—the collision and collusion of bodies in physical space. The frictions so essential to city life are reduced to an absolute minimum.

Urbicide is the deliberate killing of the city. The term, yet to be commonplace, is one that academics and analysts increasingly use to describe this contemporary war on and within cities. The concept refers to a focus not on the expected destruction of military targets in warfare, but rather the broader targeting of the civilian infrastructure that constitutes city life: markets, shops, schools, hospitals and other public spaces. The political aim of urbicide, argues political theorist Martin Coward, is to destroy the built environment in an attempt to enforce political and ethnic homogenisations. Spatially reorganising social groups into separated, homogenised categories, or making life unbearable for the “other”, this practice has been witnessed repeatedly in the Arab world’s cities.

Urbicide is currently being waged with particular brutality in Palestine-Israel. At the time of writing, Israel has been at war following Hamas’ attacks on October 7. In the war’s first month, Israel, according to the country’s Air Force, dropped 6,000 bombs against “Hamas targets” in Gaza. According to the Gazan Ministry of Health, at the time of publication, over 39,000 Palestinians had been killed, the majority of whom were women and children. In northern Gaza, well over half of all buildings have been damaged or destroyed, and over 2 million people displaced, mainly from north to south Gaza, placing even further pressure on already intensely overcrowded and overburdened neighbourhoods.

In late October, the Jabaliya neighbourhood near Gaza City, home to almost 116,000 people and one of the most densely populated areas on the planet, was decimated by Israeli airstrikes. According to the Gazan health ministry, more than 1,000 people were killed, injured or missing in this incident alone. “I will never forget this Jabalia massacre,” Palestinian architect Salem Al-Qudwa, who is from Gaza, told me as he tried to come to terms with the unrelenting violence unleashed by Israel on the Gaza Strip. “Generations of families have been wiped out,” he added. Now based in America, Al-Qudwa waits for daily updates from his neighbours for news of his family’s home, built by his father with years of remittances earned from working in Libya. When we spoke, he had been unable to get any news for two weeks, as his entire neighbourhood had fled ever further south to Rafah and Khan Younis, desperately seeking safety.

The stated aim of the Israeli government is to eliminate Hamas. However, with Israel’s systematic targeting and destruction of homes, schools, hospitals and public spaces deliberately making these areas uninhabitable and rendering urban life impossible, it seems that the devastation underway is a means to an end which is the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip. The displacement of Palestinians from Gaza is framed by the Israelis as a humanitarian gesture, protecting civilians while Israel “secures the area”. But the Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem identifies it as part of a longstanding Israeli policy of making life so miserable for Palestinians that they seemingly leave of their own accord.

War uses outright destruction to achieve dominance and control. But hegemony can entail the active planning and construction of a city as much as it can its destruction. For this reason, the late French urban theorist and architect Paul Virilio argued that the very



Syrian Abu Khaled looks at the rubble of his destroyed house in the rebel-held town of Douma, on the eastern outskirts of Damascus, on December 30, 2016, on the first day of a nationwide truce. Clashes erupted between Syrian government forces and opposition fighters in an area outside Damascus, despite a nationwide truce that began at midnight, a monitor said.

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creation of the town was the result of war, or at least the preparation for it. That is, urbanisation—the construction of housing, infrastructure and essential urban services—can be deployed as a tool of war. By paying more attention to how the structure and planning of the built environment are entwined with violence and warfare, the regional contours of war and the nature of contemporary urbanisation in the Middle East begins to look radically different.

On the most obvious level, uricide involves constructing and planning the city through the emplacement of concrete barriers. The soldier-consultant David Kilcullen, who, with General David Petraeus, led the United State's counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, detailed how placing thousands of substantial obstacles in Baghdad was vital to "killing the city". "We shut down the city. We brought in more than 100 kilometres of concrete T-Walls," he told National Public Radio.

The concrete barriers that the Americans implanted as they transformed and moved to control Iraq's cities came in various shapes and sizes. The military named each type of concrete barrier after an American state. The "New Jersey" barrier, originally developed by the New Jersey State Highway Department to divide highway lanes, was the smallest at three feet tall and two tons; the "Colorado" barrier (six feet tall and three and a half tons), medium-sized; the Texan (six feet eight inches tall and six tons), predictably, was the largest. In a different category are the blast- or T-Walls, that also became known in Iraq as the Bremer Wall, after Paul Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority, who en-

sured they were Baghdad's most distinguishing feature.

In Sadr City, the US military bounded and divided the city with 3,000 T-Wall sections 12-feet high, constructing what became known as the Gold Wall. This wall restricted the ability of the Mahdi army to move supplies in and out of the city and conduct attacks. The conflict in Iraq has been as much about the construction and emplacement of concrete as it has the destruction and transformation of the built environment into rubble. This vast segmentation of cities across the Arab world, which all too often remains in place after active fighting ceases, has profound implications for the nature and constitution of city life in the region.

But crude concrete barriers are not the only tactic used in uricide.

In Syria, the Assad regime announced a series of reconstruction projects that, rather than marking the end of the conflict, have been the means through which war-aims concretised. This shrewd strategy can best be described as "reconstruction as violence". For example, the regime's luxury urban mega-project, Marota City in Damascus, includes plans for housing 60,000 people. It features two skyscrapers with an air-bridge and luxury apartments in an area formerly held by opposition forces. Even though the Syrian economy has collapsed and the financing of luxury mega-projects like Marota City remains more imaginary than real, intended sites are already cleared and ready for construction. Two previously densely populated urban neighbourhoods have been wiped out, with ownership deeds already transferred to a private company. The Marota City project

represents the replacement of an entire population, an act of warfare against a population considered resistant to Assadist rule.

Meanwhile, over the past decade, the Arab world has witnessed a building boom of epic proportions. New airports, thousands of kilometres of roads and bridges, and urban developments, including entire new cities and metropolitan regions, have been constructed. Initiated in the context of extreme political pressure (e.g., following the Arab uprisings of 2011, the coup in Egypt and the attempted coup in Turkey), these urban mega-projects seem premised on the idea that one can literally build political power by dominating and quelling the civilian population through construction.

Since the coup in Egypt, the military government of Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi has announced a startling array of construction projects, including 5,000 kilometres of new roads, the expansion of the Suez Canal, eight new international airports, the modernisation of existing cities, and the construction of new desert cities. Many of these plans have remained urban fantasies, unable to materialise due to economic realities. However, 45 kilometres from Cairo, the government has been rapidly building the country's first "smart city": the new administrative capital, intended to house 6 million people and occupy an area slightly larger than Paris. Hossam el-Hamalawy, an activist-scholar who lives in exile from Egypt, explained how Sisi was abandoning "old Egypt" (the settlements along the Nile valley) for desert settlements like the new administrative capital. A key driver here is the Egyptian military, which over-



CAIRO, EGYPT- SEPTEMBER 11: An aerial view of the administrative capital of Egypt, which started to be built in 2015 to solve the population density and traffic congestion in one of the most populous cities in the world, Cairo capital of Egypt on September 11, 2023. The new capital, built on an area of approximately 700 kilometers, and located on 60 kilometers to the east of Cairo, includes the presidency, prime ministry, parliament, ministries and other government buildings as well as embassies. In the financial center of the new capital, there are buildings of the Egyptian and world banks, and many skyscrapers such as the Iconic Tower, which is the tallest building in Africa. The project will also include houses, hotels, mosques, churches, parks, universities, research and cultural centers and a new international airport. The administrative capital, built with environmentally friendly technologies, is expected to be connected to Cairo by a metro line.



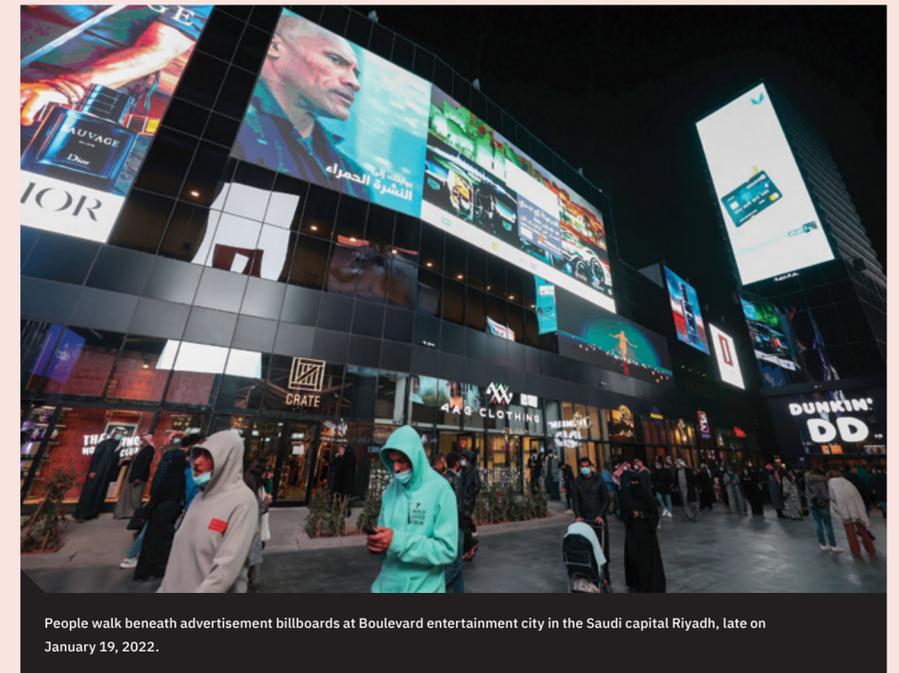
JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA - JUNE 22: People relax on a Friday evening along the Corniche waterfront as the Al Rahma mosque stands behind on June 22, 2018 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government, under Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, is phasing in an ongoing series of reforms to both diversify the Saudi economy and to liberalize its society. The reforms also seek to empower women by restoring them basic legal rights, allowing them increasing independence and encouraging their participation in the workforce. Saudi Arabia is among the most conservative countries in the world and women have traditionally had much fewer rights than men.

sees the construction and planning of the new administrative capital, owns almost all desert land, and can earn quick and easy profits from further development. Unsurprisingly, military urbanisation and the logic of control are at the heart of Egypt's new capital.

"The new capital is designed in a way that protests cannot disrupt it," el-Hamalawy remarked, "It is a post-apocalyptic urban vision of high walls... monitored by 28,000 CCTV cameras". Since the 2013 coup, when Sisi took power, rather than manage dissent, he has sought to eradicate it, el-Hamalawy explains. The construction and planning of the built environment have been a central mechanism through which Sisi has aimed to crush dissent, and smart city technologies are a hyped feature of the new administrative capital. "In Egypt, smart city technologies are just a euphemism for surveillance," notes el-Hamalawy, while also stressing that he is all for using technology to deliver urban services.

There are plans for another 14 highly militarised and securitised smart cities in Egypt, El-Hamalawy notes. The only thing preventing Sisi from further militarising Egypt's entire urban fabric is the country's economic reality, currently clashing head-on with leadership's securitised urban fantasies.

The efficacy of urbanisation processes in solidifying control is a central reason we have witnessed this vast proliferation of urban development projects and exponential growth in the scale and scope of such projects since the onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011. The breathtaking ambition of such urban development schemes is most powerfully articulated in Saudi Arabia, where a series of "giga-projects"—those that cost \$10 billion or more—have been proposed. These projects include Entertainment City, also known as Qiddiya, a development almost the size of Las Vegas that features a safari park, race track and indoor ski slope. The King Abdullah Financial District (KAFFD), a mixed-use project in Riyadh with a total cost estimated to be over \$10



People walk beneath advertisement billboards at Boulevard entertainment city in the Saudi capital Riyadh, late on January 19, 2022.

billion, is another. However, these both pale in comparison to NEOM, which has received the most international attention, proposing the construction of a \$500 billion urban region, twice the size of Lebanon.

The first planned development of NEOM is "the Line". Its moniker evoking its vertical ambitions, the proposed 170km linear smart city is conceived to have no cars, streets or carbon emissions. Estimated to cost \$48 billion, it intends to accommodate 9 million inhabitants.

While this project is unlikely to resemble its depiction in slick YouTube videos and presentations, Saudi Prince Mohammed Bin Salman drives the project personally. With the Prince determined to see something materialise, construction is occurring at a rapid pace. NEOM's first development—Sindalah, a luxury artificial island in the Red Sea—is slated for completion in 2024, and the first substantial group of Line inhabitants expected to take occupation in 2030. The NEOM site itself is a closed

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and secretive place. Several acquaintances working on the project confess needing clarification on what they look at when visiting the construction sites or what will materialise. However, they have all signed iron-clad non-disclosure agreements prohibiting them from discussing the project.

Notably, and like Sisi's new administrative capital in Egypt, the linear nature of NEOM's physical plan will make it almost impossible for urban crowds to gather, or to do so only under tightly controlled conditions. There is, of course, a long history of designing cities to quell dissent. Georges-Eugene Haussmann's modernisation project for Paris in the 1870s was famously designed with wide boulevards so cavalry could charge against rioting crowds and artillery would have a straight line of fire to break barricades. Haussmann's militarised boulevards heavily influenced the urban planning of Egypt's new administrative capital, which, like Paris, is centred around an "Arc De Triomphe". The linear city of NEOM brings the militarised logic of the boulevard to a new extreme with the formation of the city itself as a single long boulevard. The very form of the town as a line seemingly prohibits any possibility of mass gatherings, while still aiming to amass the financial gains that accompany urban concentrations. These are urban fabrics designed to limit the potential of spontaneous assembly, to prevent the happy urban accidents that define city life and control the pace of the urban.

It is important to stress that these top-down, state-imposed militarised urban plans are not the only type of urban life or form that exists in the Arab world. Even though Sisi has abandoned the densely populated Nile Valley, millions of residents remain, making and remaking this historic corridor's urban fabric. The tragedy is that inhabitants of this region do so against rather than with the support of the state. The state's disinvestment from the Nile Valley sometimes results in lethal consequences, as Egypt's urban residents resort to do-it-yourself urbanism. Building collapses are frequent due to poor construction standards. In July

2023, a five-storey building collapsed, killing 13 people in Cairo. Two days later, another collapse killed four in northern Egypt. Much of urban Egypt is falling apart. However, the region's inhabitants are accepting neither the state's neglect nor its imposed urban planning. Even as various regimes attempt to design the impossibility of dissent into the urban fabric, mobilisation both against state-imposed urban projects and for a right to the city continue. For example, Sisi's ambitions had to be scaled back due to both economic realities and widespread public resistance to those urban plans. When the Sisi regime tried to drive an expressway through the "City of the Dead", a sprawling historic district of family tombs, mausoleums and courtyards, it was, for many, a step too far. With the graves of his mother and eight generations of family resting in the City of the Dead under threat of removal, Hussein Omar noted, "A broad coalition formed made up of descendants, but also high profile calligraphers and heritage experts, prominent political figures from opposition parties, and faculty from the Fine Arts department." Omar remarks that the military was unusually cautious in securing the area. "The activists aimed to slow down the project enough so that they would run out of money, and for now, they seem to have succeeded," Omar said of the way the sanctity of the dead provoked people to mobilise in an unprecedented way against the Sisi regime.

From Khartoum to Gaza, Aleppo and Baghdad, the prospect of citizens living in cities that elevate rather than suffocate, encourage participation rather than enforce segregation, and are shaped by open spaces rather than walls appears almost utopian; the struggle for a right to the city never further away. The attempts, however, to create homogenous urban areas, towns without dissent, are always unachievable fantasies concocted by insecure autocratic megalomaniacs. The city, by its very nature, in bringing people together in a concentrated space, cannot be homogenous, and will always produce differences in opinions, lifestyles, ethnicities and politics. The right to the city is a cry and demand embedded in the very fabric of the urban. ☹



The Line exposition by NEOM in Riyadh Saudi Arabia on November 15, 2022.