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The Ecocidal Destruction of Palestine

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Abstract: Ecocide refers to the large-scale destruction, contamination and degradation of the environment. The devastation of Palestine, particularly in Gaza but also the occupied West Bank, includes systematic destruction of Palestinian-owned land and trees, the contamination of water, air and soils, and horrific tolls of human life. This is genocide and ecocide on a massive scale, the Palestinian people and their lands being the main casualties and intentional targets. The perpetrator is the Israeli state, and these harmful actions have been occurring over many decades with varying levels of intensity as part of its longer-term colonisation project. This paper charts out the recent destruction of the environment in Palestine, and the social and legal parameters of ecocide as a crime, one that is largely unrecognised and unacted upon in and because of contemporary international relations. Ecocide is a state crime of the highest order in that it contributes directly to genocide; yet it continues in Palestine with the active support of the United States and its allies, regardless of atrocities, past, present and future. Denialism in relation to ecocide goes hand in hand with denial of genocide, and each reflects the specific sectional interests and hegemonic power of Israel and the United States in the Middle East.

Introduction

This paper charts out systematic environmental destruction in Palestine and the social and legal parameters of ecocide as a crime, one that is largely unrecognised and unacted upon in and because of contemporary international relations. Used as a war strategy, environmental destruction is the reality on the ground. But vested interests and geopolitics shape how it is represented and how in this instance the law is applied.

The baseline definition of ecocide is that it refers to large-scale severely harmful environmental destruction that occurs within a given geographical area. Different interpretations of ecocide are discussed further below. In the context of colonialism, ecocide includes control over and exploitation of natural resources, contamination of local ecosystems, and destruction of infrastructure in order to subjugate the Palestinian people. This is ecocide by design.

Ecocide is inseparable from genocide. Destruction of the environment is part of systematic attempts to destroy and denigrate specific populations and is an integral part of the colonisation process (Crook, 2024; Short, 2016; Crook, Short & South, 2018). The illegal occupation of Palestinian territory by the Israeli state underpins both. As declared by the International Court of Justice in its ruling of 19 July 2024, Israel's occupation of the Gaza strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is unlawful, along with the associated settlement regime, annexation and use of natural resources (United Nations Human Rights, 2024; see also Amnesty International, 2024). The intentional destruction of the specific environments upon which Palestinians rely is part of this broader settler colonisation and genocide.

Ecocide is a form of structural violence that involves destruction of the environment in ways that are utterly devastating for ecosystems, humans, habitats, and animal and plant species (Higgins, 2012; White, 2023). It thus involves the denuding and destruction of territories to an extent that they are unviable for all that resides within them (Whyte & Saunders, 2024). Ecocide is death. But in this instance, it is targeted at very specific locations and specific groups of people. In Palestine it is inseparable from the colonial project of the Israeli state.

Destroying the Environment in Palestine

The devastation of Palestine, particularly in Gaza but also the occupied West Bank, includes systematic destruction of Palestinian-owned land and trees, the contamination of water, air and soils, and horrific tolls of human life. This is genocide and ecocide on a massive scale, the Palestinian people and their lands being the main casualties and intentional targets.

The perpetrator of this violence is the Israeli state and includes Israeli colonialist settlers supported by the Israeli state, whose harmful actions have been put into effect over many decades with varying levels of intensity. Ecocide is a state crime of the highest order given that the scale of the harm directly contributes to genocide; yet it continues in Palestine with the active support of the United States and its allies, regardless of atrocities, past, present and future. Denialism in relation to ecocide goes hand in hand with denial of genocide, and each reflects the specific sectional interests and hegemonic power of Israel and the United States in the Middle East.

Evidence of the ecocidal destruction of Palestine is readily available and apparent (as seen, for example, in global news visions). Destroying basic built environment infrastructure is integral to this. For instance, due to Israeli bombing and military attacks in Gaza, sewage, wastewater and solid waste management systems and facilities have collapsed. Official United Nations reports note that there are nearly 40 million tons of debris in this small strip of land, including unexploded ordnance and human remains. This is contaminating the ecosystem, a situation that is compounded by the more than 140 temporary waste sites and 340,000 tons of waste, untreated wastewater and sewage overflow (Albanese, 2024, pp. 7/32). Furthermore, 'Another set of urgent but less immediately visible environmental challenges include contamination of land, water resources and air by munitions and unexploded ordnance; possible instability of land arising from the prior construction of an extensive system of tunnels; and contamination of soil and water resources arising from the recent destruction and flooding of such tunnels.' (UNEP, 2024: p. 7).

The destruction of water infrastructure is mirrored in the forced closure of Gaza's sole power plant on 11

October 2023 (Shawoo et al., 2024). Energy supply is a major issue in the Palestinian territories generally and is entirely politicised. For instance, Israel consistently denies permits for Palestinian communities to build rooftop solar panels. Yet, conversely, the merged oil and natural gas field situated within the occupied West Bank has been seized by Israel and, moreover, Israel generates wind and solar energy in areas of Palestinian and Syrian lands that are under illegal occupation (Shawoo et al., 2024). This signifies that the ecocide is targeted and that it, too, forms part of the genocide.

This is also reflected in the destroying of entire swaths of arable land in Gaza, as well as the recurrent destruction of Palestinian olive groves in the occupied West Bank. Over a million olive and fruit trees have been uprooted and cut down in occupied Palestine since 1967, once again highlighting how ecocide is part of a longer-term strategy of cultural and physical extermination (Chelala, 2015; Dinc & Turk, 2025). This is on top of previous exclusions from agricultural land and Israeli state restrictions on access to fertile lands and grazing areas. The Israeli state also controls over 85 per cent of West Bank water resources (Whyte & Saunders, 2024). In Gaza, about 40 per cent of the land was previously farmed; today, it will struggle to regain any significant measure of self-sufficiency in food production even if hostilities cease given that only 1.5 per cent of its agriculture land remains accessible and undamaged (UN Human Rights Council, 2025; Monbiot, 2025). The control over and destruction of natural resources is thus another dimension of the ecocide.

Harms affecting the natural environment are also linked to the weapons used by Israel (supplied largely by the United States and its allies). For example, there are high concentrations of white phosphorus in the soils of northern Gaza, even before the current military incursions (Hamada et al., 2011). Contamination linked to munitions is a looming huge problem, especially insofar as the materials of contemporary weapons include matter such as depleted uranium and other forms of toxic material, with major implication for long-term damage to ecological systems and human health (White, 2008).

Food, water and energy insecurity in Gaza and the occupied West Bank are compounded by future risks and harms directly related to Israeli occupation policies (such as restricting efforts that might mitigate climate change) and Israeli war efforts (particularly in regard to carbon emissions). For example, it has been observed that Israel's genocidal aggression in Gaza in the first 120 days surpassed the annual emissions of over 20 individual countries, and that the rebuilding of Gaza will generate emissions higher than the annual emissions of over 135 countries (Whyte & Saunders, 2024; see also Shawoo et al., 2024). The contributions to and effects from climate change are enormous. The intended net result is to make Gaza completely unliveable.

Is This Ecocide?

Ecocide refers to the systematic destruction, contamination and degradation of the environment that causes severe harm where it occurs (Higgins, 2012). In the context of war, such activity has been criminalised in international law. The Rome Statute, for example, sets out in definitive terms the crime of ecocide as a serious crime although no individual or country has so far been prosecuted or convicted of this crime. Recent conceptualisations of ecocide include humans and entities such as rivers, animals and plants as among those considered victimised by ecocide, expanding notions of harm to include the non-human. The concept has also been extended to include environmental destruction in times of peace as well as war (White, 2023).

There is extensive literature and civil society activism focussing on the concept of ecocide. Yet, in the midst of the contemporary arguments and debates over legal and non-legal definitions, more attention needs to be paid to ecocide as a colonial project (more on this later). The fusion of ecocide and genocide in colonisation processes needs to be highlighted so as to enhance political resistance to such processes (Short, 2016; Whyte, 2020). Even within the specific frameworks of ecocide conceptualisations, however, there is opportunity to make stronger links to colonialism and genocide.

The baseline definition of ecocide is that it involves destruction, contamination and/or degradation of the environment to an extent that is measurable, serious, and harmful to that environment, with detrimental effects on its biotic (living plants and animals) and abiotic (rivers, mountains) components (White, 2024). There are at least five different conceptions of 'ecocide' that vary according to purpose and context. The first two concentrate on the seriousness of the harm; the next three focus on the criminalisation of

activities that cause the harm.

- Harm caused to the environment due to natural causes, that is, due to causes other than human agency such as animals over-grazing paddocks to the detriment of other species and ecosystems (Higgins, 2010). This is not what is happening in Palestine.

- Harm perpetrated by humans that is severe to the extent that it is described as 'criminal' in everyday parlance, for example, by scientists and journalists to emphasise the gravity of the situation and the depth of the harm (White, 2024). This is relevant to Palestine and is part of the discourses of resistance to Israeli aggression including its prevention of aid to people in Gaza (that includes, for example, resources necessary for water treatment).

- The crime is currently recognised in Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute which describes the intentional creation of widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment *during war*, the only stipulation in international law that can hold a person responsible for environmental damage. This is contentious in regard to Palestine insofar as specific legal questions may cloud the issues, including whether International Criminal Court recognition of Palestine is needed to prosecute ecocide (Ghasemi & Abtahi, 2024). The definition of 'war' in cases of colonialist imposition and illegal occupation is also contentious, Nonetheless, there is a clearly an important role for the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court to play in regards the devastation in occupied Gaza.

- The 'Stop Ecocide International' campaign has proposed a definition that operates under conditions of peace as well as war, that refers specifically to 'unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment caused by those acts'. (Stop Ecocide Foundation, 2021). This is important to considerations of what is happening in Palestine. However, as discussed below, there are also political dimensions to this that warrant critical scrutiny.

- Ecocentric conceptions of ecocide include the valuing of Nature for its own sake and protection of non-human environmental entities such as rivers, plants, animals, and landscapes (Medlock & White, 2022). This is relevant to the present situation in Palestine insofar as the destruction is severely harmful to all aspects of the local environment. An encompassing concept of ecocide is concerned with the totality of environmental destruction – a phenomenon that when it occurs is an inseparable part of genocide. The erasure of ecosystems and people's means of survival stem from strategic aims and is intentional (Monbiot, 2025).

In its varying interpretations, ecocide descriptively identifies serious harms to the environment, legally denotes an international crime that occurs during war, aspirationally seeks to criminalise serious environmental harms during times of peace, and inclusively wishes to encompass non-human entities such as ecosystems, plants and animals. While legal technicalities hamper and complicate the status of ecocide as a crime, and as a crime specifically occurring in Palestine, there is no doubt that environmental destruction on this scale and targeted in this manner has ecocidal consequences for the Palestinian people. Killing the land is simultaneously killing the people.

However, as reactions to the genocide unfolding in Gaza also illustrates, international law (e.g., humanitarian law, crimes against peace) and United Nations deliberations (e.g., multiple resolutions condemning Israel for its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories) have basically been ignored and rendered useless in the context of hegemonic global power politics. The so called 'rules bound' order seems to only apply when protecting the dominant national and economic interests of the United States and its allies including Israel.

In this political context, claims of 'ecocide' as a peacetime and/or wartime international crime are basically symbolic and are rarely if ever exercisable in practice (if current ecocide law and existing ICC cases are any indication). The importance of such charges is therefore essentially political and is thus linked to international moral persuasion rather than actual legal proceedings. Nonetheless, even given these limitations, the sensitivities surrounding ecocide as description of what is occurring in the Palestinian territories is manifest in several ways.

Denial and Ecocidal Destruction

Specifically, the ecocidal destruction in the Palestinian territories has been accompanied by concerted global campaigns of dis/misinformation and obfuscation. A range of suppression techniques and denial strategies have been deployed to silence objection and stifle criticism.

The systematic banning and killing of journalists in the Palestinian territories, for instance, is indicative of the intent of the Israeli state to shape knowledge of the ongoing atrocity. For example, in 2024 the offices of Al Jazeera were raided by heavily armed Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank and and the bureau was delivered a 45-day closure order (Al Jazeera, 2024a). Overall, journalist casualties from the Israel action, especially in Gaza, have been immense and unprecedented: 'As of September 24, 2024, CPJ's preliminary investigations showed at least 116 journalists and media workers were among the more than 42,000 killed since the war began, making it the deadliest period for journalists since CPJ began gathering data in 1992' (Al Jazeera, 2024b).

Even in the face of these barriers, the world continues to see first-hand the horrors of the Palestinian genocide/ecocide (Amnesty International, 2024; UN Human Rights Council, 2025). There are nonetheless many excuses and denials. Not 'seeing' is surely not one of them and yet, questions remain regarding why and how even those professing progressive politics can still somehow deny what is presented before them. This is evidenced by the active collusion with and dearth of criticisms of Israeli actions by Western academic institutions, and the general silence of professional associations and university intellectuals to the genocide (Ziadah, 2025; Suslovic et al., 2024). Cohen (1993) reminds us that one of the key problems in dealing with and discussing state crime is that it is not only governments and perpetrators who deny its existence, but citizens, too. When it comes to Palestine, this extends to many of us around the world, including criminologists whose supposed forte is analyses of crime and harm. Complicity in genocide/ecocide takes several forms, including the silence of the bystander.

Contrarianism is not the same, however, as naïve denialism and/or political hesitation. It refers to taking a political position based entirely on specific sectional interests rather that than facts or truth. Aggressive contrarianism begets political denialism insofar as opinion and response is shaped by intimidation and condemnation by those originally targeted as doing the wrong. Self-interest trumps fact even in the face of dire and devastating evidence. Contrarianism with respect to Israeli state engagement in Palestine is exercised in various ways, but perhaps is most strongly expressed via the warped use of specific social labels:

> We have seen these techniques of denial used with a particular level of intensity over the past month by the Israeli state, allied governments, mainstream media actors and public intellectuals promoting the ideology of Zionism, in an attempt to socially neutralize stigmatising definitions of Israeli state violence as criminal. In the current situation, the false charge of antisemitism – which conflates legitimate criticism of the genocidal actions of the state of Israel with historical persecutions of the Jewish people – is one such example, which serves to condemn the condemner. (International Expert Statement on Israeli State Crime, 2024).

The collateral political damage of such contrarianism is manifest not only in the weak response generally to Israeli and US actions, but also among those most vocal in purporting to be against ecocide. For example, while on the one hand there is a robust international movement to make ecocide the fifth crime against peace, intentional forms of ecocide already evident go largely unrecognised and unacted upon by the same advocacy groups, and there are mixed, substantially different political signals depending on the conflict and specific international relations (Stop Ecocide International 2024, 2025; Killean, 2025). As noted earlier, used as a war strategy, environmental destruction is the actual reality on the ground. But vested interests and geopolitics shape how it is represented even within relevant critical intellectual forums and law reform groups.

For instance, in 2024 Stop Ecocide Netherlands was expelled from the parent international organisation in response to an article written by its director, in which she raised the question of whether the Israeli army's destruction of nature in Gaza could constitute a war crime. The Stop Ecocide International campaign wished to convey an image of 'political neutrality' with a focus on ecocide as a response to the climate crisis. Yet, claims to neutrality were undermined by its public statements regarding acts of 'ecocide' in

the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (Stop Ecocide International, 2024). This suggests that the expulsion revealed an awareness of the international geopolitical sensitivities that may impact proposed amendments to the Rome Statute, and a strategic focus on political alignment with those perceived as allies (Killean, 2025).

Similar political silences, omissions and confusions are evident amongst professional and academic societies which adopt a 'Palestinian exception' position that contrasts to their usual condemnations of colonialism, ecocide, apartheid and genocide (Gunaratnam, 2025; Suslovic et al., 2024). For example, disciplines such as Sociology (in the United States) have likewise exhibited ambivalent solidarity with anti-colonial struggles, with Palestine long being the 'exception' in social science politics (Gunaratnam, 2025). The same with Social Work, where the response to the Palestinian genocide has largely been one of denial and suppression of solidarity with Palestine (Suslovic et al., 2024).

These examples, however, are nonetheless geopolitically bounded. For instance, the *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Journal* editorial board called in December 2023 for 'unconditional solidarity with the people of Palestine' as acknowledged in an editorial in *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry into Social Work*. The same *Affilia* editorial also acknowledged its own 'prolonged silence as complicit with acts of genocidal violence, as well as the historical harms perpetrated against the Palestinian people' (Affilia Editorial, 2025). In 2025, the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology endorsed a statement critical of the Israeli genocide; yet efforts to acknowledge genocide and condemn the perpetrator were thwarted at a General Meeting of the European Society of Criminology in September of the same year. Notably, around the same time, the latest report compiled by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel was released, which stated categorically that Israel has committed and is continuing to commit genocide in Gaza (Al-Khouri & Multheron, 2025; UN Human Rights Council, 2025).

As the evidence keeps mounting of the atrocities, so too world opinion continues to shift. On 27 June 2025, Stop Ecocide International ran a story on its website with the heading "Palestine Denounces Gaza Devastation as 'Ecocide'". However, the only reference to the state of Israel was to the 'ongoing destruction of Gaza's environment during Israel's military campaign'. Ecocide somehow just happens. Rather than describing the systematic nature of the ecocidal destruction (by focussing mainly on the scale) and condemning the perpetrator (instead focussing on the discourses used to describe the destruction) the story concludes by emphasising the emergence of a range of perspectives 'to assess whether the scale and nature of this destruction could meet the threshold of ecocide'. Again, no recognition of intent or culpability. The sense of *criminality* is thereby diminished. A curated overview of key sources is provided below the main story, but the story itself presents as a detached and politically skewed picture of the environmental destruction.

These varied interventions reveal the political dynamics that influence how ecocide is perceived and responded to by different organisations. The present commentary began by describing the environmental harms occurring in the territories of Occupied Palestine. It then interpreted these harms through the lens of diverse definitions and conceptualisations of ecocide. Attention then turned to the muting of political critique and response through mechanisms of contrarianism and denialism. The latter includes silences and omissions ostensibly because of (legal) definitional ambiguities and ongoing assessments of thresholds associated with proposed ecocide laws. The fundamental problem with this, however, is that ecocide is a *process*, not simply an event (see also Rosenberg, 2012). To prevent it requires intervention now, not once it is a fait accompli. Satisfying a legal definition is meaningless if it sacrifices action to protect people and places in the here and now.

In the face of strong-arm tactics and contrarian manipulations, exposure of war crimes and concerted public protest and demonstrations against these is fundamental to the political process. Israel must be penalised substantively for its actions in Gaza if the ecocide/genocide is to be stopped. This means stopping the supply of arms and munitions to Israel. It means imposing trade restrictions and boycotts on Israeli goods and services. It means protecting free speech, including within schools and universities, such as the right to critique Israeli colonialism and not conflating this with anti-Semitism. Ownership of land, and destruction of the land, are vital parts of these political narratives and interventions. Hence, the importance of raising ecocide as part of the larger campaign against Israeli genocide.

Conclusion

The Israel-United States nexus has ensured continued occupation, destruction and denigration of the Palestinian territories. This has been accomplished by material support for the ecocide/genocide, such as supply of munitions, as well as propaganda initiatives that reinforce denial of the atrocities occurring in plain sight.

Ecocide in Palestine must be stopped. There is urgent need to reinforce awareness of the horrors of what is happening in Gaza, its longer-term consequences for the people, ecosystems, animals and plants of the region, and to view environmental destruction on this scale as an international crime warranting condemnation and intervention. It is an integral part of the genocide. Documentation and recognition of this environmental harm as ecocide is vital to international legal intervention via the ICC and ICJ as well as adding further weight to civil society demands for cessation of the war/occupation, reparations for the damage and acknowledgement of Palestinian land rights.

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