A Conflict in Space

Hollow Land:
Israel's Architecture of Occupation
by Eyal Weizman
Verso, 2007,
318 pages.

Reviewed by Yagil Henkin

"All theory, dear friend, is gray," said Goethe, "but the golden tree of life springs ever green." In the world of Eyal Weizman's *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, the opposite is true: Theory erupts in technicolor, while life is still stuck in black and white. It is hardly surprising, then, that in Weizman's world, when theory and reality collide, the former always comes out on top.

Weizman is an Israeli architect who lives in London and manages the Center for Research Architecture at Goldsmith College. He is also a left-wing radical who spends a considerable amount of time and energy exposing the alleged wrongdoings of the State of Israel. He has, for example, served on the board of directors of B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organization, since 2008, as well as participated in a project titled "Decolonizing Architecture," which seeks to assist the residents of the Palestinian villages of Beit Sahor, Bethlehem, and Beit Jalla to utilize more effectively the territories freed from Israeli presence. His book *Hollow Land*, published in 2007, is part and parcel of these political activities. Taking as its subject "the transformation of the occupied Palestinian territories since 1967," it focuses on "the geographical, territorial, urban, and architectural conceptions and the interrelated practices that form and sustain them." In over 300 pages interspersed with photographs, Weizman attempts to explain how "mundane elements of planning and architecture have become tactical tools and the means of dispossession"—in other words, how the Israelis have succeeded in subjugating the Palestinians through the calculated use of space.

Weizman marshals a wide array of evidence in support of his thesis. No aspect—however seemingly

insignificant—of Israeli-Palestinian relations escapes his notice, and no association seems too strained. In the introduction, for example, Weizman recounts the story of the foundation of Migron, a Jewish outpost located five kilometers north of Jerusalem, as a stronghold that slowly formed around a cellular antenna, remarking that "the logic of cellular communication seems oddly compatible with that of the civilian occupation of the West Bank." Later, he describes the settlements as a form of "vertical" control over the Palestinian population, on account of their frequently being perched on elevated areas overlooking Arab villages. He also offers a creative interpretation of the one-sided mirror at the Allenby crossing into Israel from Jordan, insisting that it serves as an attempt to trick the Palestinians into thinking that *they* are the masters of their own destiny—a kind of illusory sovereignty meant only for show.

The list goes on: Former prime minister Ariel Sharon is presented by Weizman as a predatory general/architect who orchestrated not only the construction of the settlements, but also the "design undertaken by destruction" of the Palestinian refugee camps, and both the security fence and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip represent, in Weizman's telling, a paradigmatic shift from a method of control based on Israeli presence in Palestinian territories to one that seeks to dominate these areas "from beyond." Weizman, it should be mentioned, thankfully avoids the usual trap of presenting Israel as a monolithic entity. Instead, he portrays it as a collection of governmental and sub governmental entities fighting amongst themselves, each promoting its own agenda with the assistance or opposition of the others—almost all of them, it goes without saying, being fundamentally malevolent.

This grab bag of speculations is firmly grounded in modern critical theory. Indeed, throughout the book Weizman cites such neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial heavyweights as Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Edward Said, and Adi Ophir. Yet if the book's radical appeal ensures its admission into the post-Zionist canon, its theoretical baggage inevitably weighs it down. Indeed, its barely concealed biases and distortions would irritate any reader, whatever his politics.

Hollow Land is not and does not purport to be an academic work. Rather, it was drafted entirely to serve the author's ideological views, which are, as noted above, hostile to

all things Israeli. Right at the book's beginning, Weizman declares,

> Although this book is largely framed between 1967 and the present, and primarily within the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it does not seek to claim that the spatial injustices of the conflict started only after the Six Day War of June 1967, and that the extent of the present injustices are confined to the 1967 occupied territories. Nor does it underestimate the century-old process of Zionist colonization, land grab, and dispossession that preceded it.

In other words, Weizman believes that the occupation of 1967 is nothing but a natural continuation of the "occupation" of 1948 and the Zionist crimes that preceded it. The occupation that has taken place in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the Six Day War are, to his mind, nothing but a "laboratory of the extreme" that underscores the brutality that has characterized Zionism from the outset. In line with this approach, Weizman often refers even to Jewish towns *within* the Green Line as "settlements." He also expresses his displeasure at efforts to renovate Palestinian refugee camps, worrying that such improvements may jeopardize their residents' "right of return."

Reading *Hollow Land*, one is left with the impression that Israel can do nothing at all of which Weizman would approve. Quite simply, the Jewish state contaminates everything with which it comes in contact. Frequently this stance leads him into flagrant contradictions, such as when he condemns Israel both for dismantling evacuated settlements *and* for considering the possibility of not doing so; both for making life difficult for Palestinian residents of the territories *and* for preventing a humanitarian crisis there (in order to consolidate its control, of course). He attacks the IDF's decision to use precision-guided munitions with special warheads (which cause fewer civilian casualties) because, he argues, it renders targeted killings (of terrorists, that is) more "tolerable," and he denounces Israeli architecture in Jerusalem because it aspires to a false "Orientalist" authenticity. To Weizman, even the shingled roofs used in settlement housing are just a means of demonstrating distinction from Arab homes, although almost every community in Israel has them.

His use of data is also decidedly selective. For example, he claims that "from the beginning of the [second] Intifada to the end of 2006, 339 Palestinians were killed in targeted IDF assassinations. Only 210 of those were the intended targets; the rest were Palestinians whose daily lives

brought them to the wrong place at the wrong time." On the face of it, this description is indeed disturbing. It is therefore a shame that Weizman did not bother to follow the statistics relating to such casualties over the years. Since he does not do so, the reader has no way of knowing that the rate of Palestinian non combatants killed as a result of targeted assassinations decreased consistently since 2003, when it was near 50 percent, to less than 10 percent in 2005-2006, finally dropping to just 2-3 percent in 2007 (after the book was published)—a figure that bespeaks careful, concerted efforts on the part of the IDF to reduce civilian casualties whenever possible.

Weizman's heavy reliance on data from B'Tselem reports is also problematic, because the organization counts Palestinians as "combatants" only if they are engaged in terrorist activity at the time of their death. In 2008, for example, B'Tselem reported that more than a third of Palestinians killed in IDF targeted assassinations during the previous year had not "taken part in hostilities." An investigation by researcher Yehonatan Dahuh-Levi into Palestinian publications, however, revealed that over *80 percent* of those killed were known, active members of terrorist organizations. Weizman also claims that targeted killings did not help reduce Palestinian violence, and did nothing to curb Palestinians' hatred of Israel. He may be right with regard to the latter, but surely the fact of the overwhelming reduction in Palestinian terrorist activities following operations Defensive Shield and Determined Path in 2002, together with the temporary paralysis of Hamas after the killing of most of its leadership in 2004 cannot be so easily dismissed.

Nor is Weizman averse to demagogic and irrelevant historical analogies. When discussing the Ring Road, a complex traffic artery in East Jerusalem, for example, he deems it relevant to mention a 1939 proposal by Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to connect the city of Danzig to Germany via an extraterritorial road across Poland. Yet for some reason, Weizman ignores the more recent, and far more relevant, case of the 1954 American "Plan Alpha," which tried to force Israel to give up part of the Negev in order to create a passageway between Egypt and Jordan, with similar extraterritorial road arrangements. One imagines that referring to Eisenhower in this context is simply not as effective as invoking Ribbentrop. In the same vein, Weizman writes that "the military code name for the Jenin camp, in which resistance groups were most strongly entrenched, was 'Germania.' Whether in reference

to Tacitus's ambivalent description of the barbarians, or in reference to the Nazi regime, this term encapsulates the fear of the 'evil' it believes is bred." This is, unquestionably, a brilliant piece of rhetoric, but it bears no relation whatsoever to reality. In all likelihood, Weizman has never heard of the IDF's practice of giving cities and countries code names whose first letter are the same in the Hebrew alphabet (Jenin and Germany, or *Germania* in modern Hebrew, both begin with the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *Gimmel*). Accordingly, certain areas around Jenin were called Milan and Naples. Weizman may insist that these names, too, reflect certain of Israel's existential terrors (of fashion and pizza, perhaps?), but this is doubtful. More likely, sometimes a code name is just a code name, and nothing else.

Despite these serious flaws, *Hollow Land* is more than just another instance of anti-Zionist propaganda (though readers who assume otherwise may be forgiven). It also contains a good deal of interesting and thought-provoking insights, many of which are contained in a chapter that discusses the combat tactics adopted by the IDF during Operation Defensive Shield and the Second Lebanon War. This chapter was slated to be published as an essay in the Israeli journal *Theory and Criticism*, but its publication was prevented on account of the protests of one of the chapter's protagonists, Brigadier General Aviv Kochavi, who threatened a lawsuit for defamation, as well as by subsequent disputes between Weizman and the journal's editors. The text was eventually published in 2008 by the radical-left Israeli journal *Mitaam* ("Mouthpiece").

Here, Weizman claims that the "low-intensity warfare" tactics developed by the IDF have been greatly influenced by post-modern theoreticians. In the 1990s, the Israeli army established several research bodies tasked with formulating a new kind of warfare, the most prominent of them being the Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI). According to Weizman, this group created a new military language based on complex theoretical concepts. Brigadier General Shimon Naveh, one of the institute's founders, boasted in an interview with Weizman that his ideas were inspired by, among others, the writings of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, especially their collaborative work *Mille plateaux* ("A Thousand Plateaus"), which was published in 1980. Deleuze and Guattari, who would have rolled over in their graves if they knew their theory was being used by the Israeli army in a campaign against the

Palestinians, outlined an extremely complex system of thought that criticized social and psychological structures aspiring to stability, hierarchy, and order. Instead, they proposed the ideal of branched-out, anarchic systems that allow for an uninterrupted and almost unlimited "flow." The influence of this approach is obvious in Naveh's interview with Weizman:

> In the IDF we now often use the term "to smooth out a space" when we want to refer to operation in a space in such a manner that borders do not affect us…. Rather than contain and organize our forces according to existing borders, we want to move through them.

The resulting tactic of "walking through walls" was tried, with great success, in an IDF operation in the Nablus *casbah* ("old quarter") during Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002. In order to take out Palestinian terrorists dug in among booby-trapped buildings and streets, the IDF used what Kochavi, then commander of the paratroopers' brigade, called "inverse geometry." Weizman recounts,

> Soldiers avoided using the streets, roads, alleys, and courtyards that define the logic of movement through the city, as well as external doors, internal stairwells, and windows that constitute the order of buildings; rather, they were punching holes through party walls, ceilings and floors, and moving across them through 100-meter-long pathways of domestic interior hollowed out of the dense and contiguous city fabric.

The soldiers' movements through the casbah did not conform to linear military conventions. Rather, they were based on the concept of "swarming," or military operations in which autonomous or semi-autonomous units of action attack an enemy from different directions and then regroup. The same tactic was employed in the IDF raid on the Balata refugee camp, just weeks before Operation Defensive Shield. Kochavi's orders to his troops stated, in part,

> We completely isolate the camp in daylight, creating the impression of a forthcoming systematic siege operation… [and then] apply a fractal maneuver, swarming simultaneously from every direction and through various dimensions of the enclave.… Our movement through the buildings pushes [the insurgents] into the streets and alleys, where we hunt them down.

This "non linear" approach garnered impressive tactical success in refugee camps. For example, in an IDF operation in the Nablus casbah, a particularly treacherous urban area, eighty Palestinians were killed, the majority of whom were terrorists, and

only one IDF soldier, who was hit by friendly fire.

Weizman, of course, is unmoved by these tactics' success—indeed, he hardly considers them a success at all. He quotes human rights organizations which determined that "dozens of Palestinian civilians died during the attacks," and does not bother to mention that most of the dead were not killed in Nablus at all, but in the battle of Jenin, where the swarming method wasn't widely used. Furthermore, he cites testimonies of Palestinian families that experienced the tactic firsthand, as holes were blasted in the walls of their apartments from which Israeli soldiers emerged. He declares that the "unexpected penetration of war into the private domain of the home has been experienced by civilians in Palestine… as the most profound form of trauma and humiliation." The trouble with Weizman's moral outrage in this case is that both the material and emotional damage described here pale in comparison to the massive destruction typical of warfare in heavily populated urban areas. Empirically speaking, the harm caused by the IDF's "swarm" operations in the Palestinian refugee camps simply do not come anywhere near the degree of carnage exacted by the Russians in the Chechen capital of Grozny, or the damage inflicted by the Americans on both Mogadishu and Fallujah, to take just a few recent examples.

Unfortunately, the tactics that proved so effective during Operation Defensive Shield failed to meet the challenge posed by the Second Lebanon War. Weizman sardonically points out that the two commanders most prominently identified with the failure to prevent the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Schalit and the blunders in the Second Lebanon War of 2006 are the same OTRI "whiz kids" who orchestrated the raids on Balata and Nablus in 2002, brigadier generals Kochavi and Gal Hirsch, who was at the time the joint operations/staff officer of the Israeli central command. The latter, who commanded the Galilee division during the war, issued the now-infamous order to take the Lebanese town of Bint Jbeil by using "a simultaneous, multidimensional swarm pouncing"—jargon that was roundly (if not completely fairly) mocked after the war. The Wynograd Commission's report, for instance, which examined the shortcomings of the Israeli performance during the war, dryly stated, "It would have been better had his orders been given, in their entirety, in a language understood by all."

Why did the "swarm" approach that had worked so well in Nablus

fail so utterly in Lebanon? Weizman has a ready explanation: During the Intifada, "the occupation forces" were attacking "poorly armed Palestinian guerillas" and "frightened civilians." Hezbollah, by contrast, was a highly organized opponent smart enough to use the IDF's swarming techniques to its own advantage. To be sure, such speculations were popular both during and after the war, but it is doubtful that they provide a sufficient explanation—after all, most direct engagement between the sides ended with Hezbollah's combatants *retreating*, and in Jenin, the IDF suffered more killed than in the famous battle of Bint Jbeil. Moreover, the claim that the hypertheoretical approach endorsed by OTRI caused confusion among the IDF's lower ranks is also unsatisfactory, though it does contain more than a grain of truth. Far more likely is that this type of thinking became harmful only as it moved *up* the ranks, to the IDF high command. One must not forget that during the operations in Balata and Nablus, Shimon Naveh's post-modern philosophy and terminology served a well-defined and limited purpose. In Lebanon, however, confusion reigned: Soldiers and officers received contradictory orders, the logic of which was not at all apparent. In short, when the complicated theory was subordinated to simple military logic, it got real results; when it replaced this logic, it proved useless. Kochavi once called the methods used in Nablus an "organized mess." Unfortunately, in the Second Lebanon War, the mess overwhelmed the organization.

Clearly Weizman is outraged that IDF officers dared to use the radical theories so dear to his heart in their campaign against Palestinian terrorists. In his interview with Naveh, he asks how an army man can reconcile these theories' leftist agenda with the oppression of the Palestinians. Naveh replied,

> Theories do not only strive for a utopian socio-political ideal with which we may or may not agree, but are also based on methodological principles that seek to disrupt and subvert the existing political, social, cultural, or military order. The destructive capacity is the aspect of theory that we like and use.

To Weizman, this claim recalls yet another revolutionary theoretician, the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse. "This is a particularly chilling demonstration of what Herbert Marcuse warned of as early as 1964," writes Weizman, "that… 'contradiction and criticism' could be equally subsumed and made operative as an

instrumental tool by the hegemony of power." All of this is not to say anything negative about the theories themselves, of course. On the contrary, Weizman rushes to absolve them of any crimes committed by the Zionist occupation. His intent, he says, is "not to place blame for Israel's recent aggression in the hands of radical theorists and artists, or to question the purity of their intentions."

This vigorous defense of theory is particularly pronounced given Weizman's sharp criticism of almost everything else—including various international humanitarian organizations he accuses of "unwittingly aiding" the occupation. It seems, in fact, that Weizman's loyalty to radical theory is stronger than his concern for human beings. When he discusses, for example, the contribution of Marxist ideology to the PLO's 1970s policy of deliberately perpetuating the misery of Palestinian refugees, he mentions the concept of *la politique du pire*—in a nutshell, the idea that a revolutionary should make a given situation as bad as possible in order to garner sympathy and political support, or to arouse revolt amongst the people. Many terrorist and guerilla organizations adopted this inhumane logic out of the belief that "the pace of change could be accelerated by acts of indiscriminate violence designed to provoke the ruling power to throw off the mask of legality and reveal itself to the peasants and workers in all its brutality." The Shining Path, for example, a brutal Maoist guerilla organization in Peru, applied this strategy when it murdered aid workers whose only sin was to try and ease the suffering of poor villagers. While Weizman does not explicitly advocate this point of view, it would seem from his harsh criticism of UN aid to Palestinian refugees—an assistance that only makes the occupation "bearable"—that he holds similar beliefs. In fact, he appears to feel that any act of mercy that might dampen the flames of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only plays into the hands of the Zionist oppressor, and must therefore be rejected.

Ultimately, it seems that the real reason for Weizman's objection to the IDF's utilization of post-modern theories is not that he rejects violence, but rather that he opposes anything that represents what he perceives as the existing order: the Zionist regime, the occupation, colonialism, capitalism, etc. This approach, which is shared by prominent thinkers on the radical left such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Antonio Negri, glorifies subversive action over any humanitarian considerations, treating real people as if they were no more

than means to a revolutionary end. Weizman is no exception. His book purports to show how the occupation has turned an "occupied space" into a "hollow land," but in truth it treats its human subjects—Israeli and Palestinian alike—as "hollow" people, mere pawns to be sacrificed on the theoretical chess board.

Yagil Henkin is a military historian and a fellow at the Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies at the Shalem Center.