# Forensic Aesthetics

Eyal Weizman
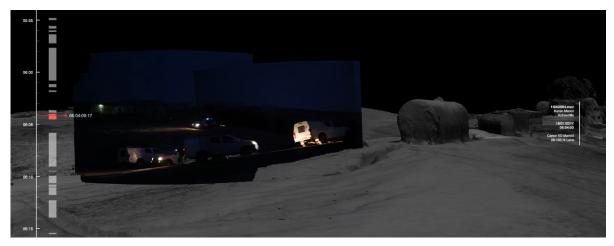
This contribution draws upon a talk entitled *Forensic Architecture* by Eyal Weizman, part of Liverpool Biennial 2018 public programme curated by The Serving Library.[1]

Forensic Architecture is both the name of an agency established in 2010, and a form of investigative practice into state violence and human-rights violations that traverses architectural, journalistic and legal fields.

The piece highlights four projects that featured in the talk: *Killing in Umm Al-Hiran* (2017), *Saydnaya* (2016), *Torture and Detention in Cameroon (*2017) and *The Gaza Platform (*2015). Progressing through these projects as case studies, it serves to unpack the term 'forensic aesthetics', one of several key concepts that underlie the group's approach. Typically associated with illusionary trickery and subjective sentiment, the notion of 'aesthetics' seems at odds with the definition of truth as something that is objectively given. Yet Weizman sees forensics as an aesthetic practice because the modes and means by which incidents are understood and evidence is presented involve aesthetic considerations.

## I. Killing in Umm Al-Hiran [2]



Forensic Architecture, *Killing in Umm Al-Hiran,* 2017

Shortly before dawn on 18 January 2017, Israeli police raided the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran. Their aim was to demolish several houses, part of efforts to force Bedouin communities away from land earmarked for new Jewish settlements.

Two people were killed during the raid: Yakub Musa Abu al-Qi'an, a Bedouin and resident of the village, and Erez Levi, an Israeli policeman. Israel's government and police claimed the deaths were the result of a 'terror attack' by al-Qi'an, and suggested that he had links to the terrorist group ISIL.

Reports from eye-witnesses, however, appeared to contradict those claims. Forensic Architecture (FA) worked with a group of documentary photographers, Activestills, to scrutinise the allegations against al-Qi'an, exposing glaring inconsistencies and forcing politicians and the police to change their story repeatedly.

The results and progress of our investigation are currently displayed at the Tate Britain's Turner Prize 2018 exhibition. The material displayed will be submitted in support of a legal appeal in Israel against the closure of a formal investigation of the police responsible for al-Qi'an's death.

The story of our investigation, and that of the case itself, unfolded over more than a year. The timeline below follows that story, from the morning of the attack until the eviction of the village of Umm al Hiran in April 2018.

## II. Saydnaya [3]



Forensic Architecture, *Saydnaya,* 2016

Since 2011 thousands have died in Syria's prisons and detention facilities. With anyone perceived to be opposed to the Syrian government at risk, tens of thousands of people have been tortured and ill-treated in violation of international law.

In April 2016, Amnesty International and Forensic Architecture travelled to Istanbul to meet five survivors from Saydnaya Prison, near Damascus. In recent years, no journalists or monitoring groups that report publicly have been able to visit the prison or speak with prisoners.

# III. Torture and detention in Cameroon [4]

Forensic Architecture, *Torture and detention in Cameroon,* 2017

Since 2014, Cameroon has been at war with Boko Haram, an armed extremist group responsible for thousands of murders and abductions across the Lake Chad Basin.

Trained and supported by US and European governments, and armed by Israeli private companies, the Cameroonian security forces act with increasing impunity against civilians in the country's Far North region.

Between 2015 and 2016, Amnesty International collected evidence of over a hundred cases of illegal detention, torture and extra-judicial killing of Cameroonian citizens accused of supporting or being a member of Boko Haram, at around twenty sites across the country.

Using testimony and information supplied by Amnesty International, Forensic Architecture reconstructed two of these facilities – a regional military headquarters, and an occupied school – in order to confirm and illustrate the conditions of incarceration and torture described by former detainees.

## IV. The Gaza Platform [5]

Forensic Architecture, *The Gaza Platform,* 2015

The Gaza Platform enables its users to explore a vast collection of data, collected on the ground by the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), as well as Amnesty International, during and after the 2014 conflict.

Produced through a year-long collaboration between Forensic Architecture and Amnesty International, the Gaza Platform is a new gateway to this precious, first-hand information: it not only gives access to a large quantity of otherwise dispersed data, but helps to make sense of it.

The Gaza Platform is the most comprehensive public repository of information about attacks carried out during the 2014 Gaza conflict to date. At the time of its launch on 8 July 2015, it featured over 2,750 individual events, recording the deaths of more than 2,200 people, including 1,800 civilians and 600 children. As a digital interface, it enables access not only to text reports, but also to photos, videos, audio recordings and satellite imagery documenting the war – all in one place.

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[1] It also draws upon the Forensic Architecture website with respect to project descriptions.

[2] See: https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/umm-al-hiran/

[3] See: https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/saydnaya/

[4] See: https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/cameroon/

[5] See: https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/the-gaza-platform/

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## Eyal Weizman

Eyal Weizman is an Israeli intellectual and architect. He is Professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures at

Goldsmiths, London, and Director of the Centre for Research Architecture – a 'laboratory for critical spatial practices' that he created within the Department of Visual Cultures. In 2011 he established the agency Forensic Architecture, an interdisciplinary team of investigators that provides advanced architectural and media evidence to civil-society groups such as truth commissions, courts and human-rights reports. Forensic Architecture is nominated for the Turner Prize 2018.