Gemma: Homs was once the centre of the Syrian revolution. Today, much of the city remains scarred and deserted after years of siege and heavy bombardment. In this episode, what the deliberate destruction of homes and neighborhoods known as domicile does to people displaced by conflict.

My name is Gemma Ware and this is The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

I'm joined for this episode by Paul Keaveny, the investigations editor at The Conversation in the UK. Welcome to the show, Paul.

Paul: Hi Gemma.

Gemma: So Paul, over the past few weeks, during coverage of the Israeli military bombardment of Gaza, which has been streamed all over the world following the Hamas massacre in southern Israel, there’s been a lot of footage emerging of the scale of the destruction in the Gaza Strip, including of residential blocks, of mosques and industrial facilities. And watching all of this, I've been thinking a lot about a story that you worked on a little while ago with an academic from Syria called Ammar Azzouz. Tell me about him. You've been talking to him for a few years now, haven't you?

Paul: Yeah, that's right. Ammar is a British Academy Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. Now, he and I first spoke back in early 2021 after he pitched a story idea to me about a decade of destruction in Homs, Syria. So I thought he had quite a unique perspective because he's from Homs and experienced the city before the war and was there for the start of the conflict. He was actually forced to flee the country in 2011 and has been in exile ever since. Ammar, is a trained architect, and he's made the destruction of places like Homs the centre of his research.

Gemma: And he's just written a powerful new book about Homs. What's the focus of this new research?

Paul: Well, most of his academic career has been spent studying the impact of war on architecture and cities, and researching acts of deliberate destruction on
homes. What scholars call domicile, and that's actually the name of his new book. So after we worked on that initial short story in 2021, we did keep in touch. And earlier this year, we worked on a long read that outlined some of the key thoughts underpinning the book. That story was really about how warfare turns neighborhoods into battlefields. It's very personal and it contains some no doubt painful reflections and memories.

Essentially he's trying to answer questions like how do we rebuild cities after war? Who decides the shape and future of cities? How do you protect endangered heritage? And how can you engage with local communities in the process of reconstruction so that their voices are heard? But more than anything I suppose it's a story about hope. A story about how places like Homs can and should be rebuilt. And also about how we remember and memorialize the things that we’ve lost.

**Gemma:** Thanks Paul for introducing Ammar to us. I actually called him up in mid October and I started out by asking him what it was like growing up in Homs.

**Ammar:** I lived in Homs for 23 years and absolutely loved my life there. Homs is similar to other cities in Syria like Damascus and Aleppo. It had an old city and my grandparents actually lived in the old city. So in one of my memories of visiting my grandparents, for instance, it was walking in these tiny alleys and going to the traditional markets and exploring these courtyard houses and going to the citadel of Homs. It's like an ancient citadel that you can only see the hill of it and a little bit of that heritage.

I didn't grow up in the old city. I grew up in the outskirts of the old city. And there was like migration in Homs in the last several decades from different parts of the country and from the countryside. So the western part of Homs had like a very large green belt and it has a river called Al Asi River or the Orontes River. This green pelt connected the old city with what's called as the new Homs. Or in Arabic, we call it Al-Waar neighborhood. And in between these, there was this big belt of green areas and the river and it became like a hub for the local residents to go for picnics, for runs, for spending time together just like in between these like green areas.

**Gemma:** Tell me what was it like, kind of wandering around Homs when you were growing up?

**Ammar:** It's the third largest city in Syria after Damascus and Aleppo. So in somehow it wasn't under the spotlight in the country. So we didn't receive the
same support for development and infrastructure. So it was being neglected somehow. But because of that neglect also, it was like a city that was quiet and peaceful. And it was called like the city of the poor because like people from all sorts of backgrounds and social income felt that they can belong. So it was called actually the mother of the poor. So it was a place where everybody. People were very kind and warm and generous. Like now when I look back in time, I just feel like I continue to bring these elements of kindness and generosity and welcoming and hospitality from my city, that people, even when they had very little, they offered everything they have to their friends, to their neighbors, they were generous in their nature. So Homs was generous and I carry it with me wherever I go in London or Oxford or other cities.

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**Gemma:** Homs is actually often now referred to as the heart of Syria's uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad, which started in 2011. So everything you described really started to change from that point. Tell me your story of leaving the city.

**Ammar:** Every Syrian person has their own story with the 2011 moment, which I always say it's like a new turning point or a turning page in the history of Syria. So for myself in 2011, I finished already my architecture degree and I was the top student at the time. So I was teaching at the university, at the department of architecture in the university in Homs. And when the revolution started, the protests were spreading across the city.

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**Ammar:** I was living in a neighborhood called Al Insha'at which is very close to another targeted neighborhood called Baba Amr and I can still remember like seeing the shelling of Baba Amr from our balcony, from our home. And I can also remember days when I was walking towards the university, walking, actually instead of like going by any public transportation because everything stopped for a few days in early times of the uprising.

And I remember like walking next to a tank and just like fearing if they would stop me or they would question me. And I also remember one protest that happened in our street in Al Insha'at neighborhood where the peaceful protest was targeted and a few people were killed including one of my architecture student friends. Taher Al Sebai. So all these memories were very personal to me, but the early days of the revolution were days of so much hope that a
change is coming, but also they were days of fear because of all these explosions that were happening across the city.

And I do remember like the explosion happening one time I was teaching in the architecture department, where a bomb happened in the building next to us in the civil engineering department. The glass of the design studio where I was teaching, breaking, and just chaos was everywhere in the department. People were in fear and were running like what to do, so we had to evacuate everyone. And after a bit like we just left the department and everyone went back to their homes.

**Gemma:** OK. And so did you leave quite soon after that happened?

**Ammar:** So the revolution started in March 2011 and I left Syria in the 17 of November of the same year. That was the time I left and I never returned since then.

**Gemma:** That was 12 years ago. The uprising in Syria escalated into a brutal civil conflict with dozens of rebels and extremist groups fighting against government forces and their allies. Over the years, more rebel groups emerged, and Russia and Iran also came to the Assad government's aid. Estimates put the number of people killed at more than half a million. Homs played a central role in the uprising, and as a result, parts of the city suffered years of widespread violence, heavy bombardment, and deliberate destruction. In December 2017, after a prolonged siege, fighters from the last pockets of resistance left Homs, and government forces regained control. Ammar says today the city he once knew is unrecognizable.

**Ammar:** And somehow for that opposing position to the government, the city has paid a very huge price in terms of being targeted many times. And the strategy that was used by the Syrian government, during these early years of the revolution, is to siege different neighborhoods in Homs and to try to control these neighborhoods. So many parts of the city, such as the old city or Al-Waar neighborhood that I mentioned a little bit earlier, different neighborhoods have been sieged completely so that people can be controlled; who can enter or who can exit the neighborhood.

And the city, throughout the last 12 years, has been transformed enormously. So over 50% of the neighborhoods have been heavily destroyed and over a quarter of the neighborhoods have been partially destroyed. And somehow Homs has become a place of ruins where people are moving across the city in their everyday life between ruined neighborhoods and still standing neighborhoods,
or like in between, you know, where there are still partially destroyed neighborhoods. So it's really like a radical transformation of the city in the last 12 years.

Gemma: I want to take a moment here because one of the things that struck me when I was kind of reading your research is this idea that you are hungry to see what's happened to your city. And that you, every time there's a new video that comes out online, you go and look for it and you want to see what it shows and how things have changed and how they're being rebuilt or not. And so you've actually shared with me, two videos and I wanted you to talk me through what we're seeing.

Ammar: So this is part of the old city in Homs and you can see at the end that's part of the citadel, on the right, where you see like some green areas but you can also see like the empty buildings, the mass destruction. Almost like nobody is living there anymore.

Gemma: Tell me about why actually videos like this are so rare to get hold of?

Ammar: Until now, like many people still fear to film because the government doesn't want to show as if there's a way to hide everything they have done. So there's still like a fear to record and document what has happened to the city and what's happening today. So even a photographer… any person is photographing could be stopped or questioned on why you are photographing or what you are doing this for. And every person even just for a tiny film or a video they need to have like a permission, a formal permission to do so. So they are very rare and it's important to document what happened. Otherwise, even that memory would be erased.

Gemma: So, OK. We’ve got a second video here. Tell me do you remember what this street looked like before?

Ammar: I do remember because this was the mosque that I visited many times, it's called Al-Zawiyah Mosque, or it translates to the corner mosque because it's in a corner of a square and it's in the old city in Homs. I do remember like a neighborhood being very busy, full of life, and full of people going for prayers or going to the shops. And now as you can see, it's all so, you can hardly see two people on their motorbikes in the background.

Gemma: You can see a bit of a mosque. It's all… the windows are bombed out. You can see rubble. This is a city that's deserted in many ways, right?
Ammar: Yeah. Hmm.

Gemma: What does it feel like when you watch these videos?

Ammar: Somehow it still feels sometimes unreal. Sometimes, like I know that all destruction has happened, but I still question like how did that all happen? And I always like, even after 12 or 13 years, I still ask myself, how could somebody live after all that suffering? How to live after all this horror? It still feels very painful until now, to see a destroyed building, and years and years after it's still destroyed, and somehow Syria, I always say, Syria was the main headlines, and the world forgets, and everyone moves on, and it becomes like endnote in history.

Gemma: Since leaving Homs, Ammar has continued to research and teach about architecture. His work focuses on the deliberate destruction of cities in conflict. The term he uses for this is domicide, and it's also the title of a new book that he's just published. Tell me, to start with, what you mean when you use this word, domicide?

Ammar: Domicide refers to the deliberate destruction of home, from the word domus, which means home in Latin. And cide is the deliberate killing. So in somehow this term refers to the killing of the city or the killing of home. And by home here, it doesn't only mean like the physical, tangible built environment of people's homes and properties, but it also refers to people's sense of belonging and identity. Where we are seeing in many conflicts and wars across the world that, not only architecture is being destroyed, but that sense of dignity and belonging of people, is being also targeted. So that they are deeply in a sense of displacement, continuous displacement, and in a sense of like their history is being erased.

Gemma: And so how would you say that it differs from other forms of violence?

Ammar: These campaigns are campaigns to erase community, to erase that they have actually existed in this place, to erase that they have a culture and history, and in somehow, domicide refers to the physical destruction of people's memory, but also the presence of them. So in somehow they are also displaced, and uprooted, and sometimes for like decades, or for a lifetime. So in somehow, writing people out of history through destroying their heritage, but also through removing them in a way that it's systematic and deliberate.
**Gemma:** You’ve also talked about how architecture particularly has been a deliberate target for destruction. Perhaps, tell me what you mean by architecture, in that sense.

**Ammar:** I try to shift the conversation and look at people's homes and their ways of living and the schools and their mosques and churches and their markets. So all these, like, elements that shape everyday life have been targeted. Not only a monument, not only an ancient site, the way of living has been targeted. The architecture of the everyday has been destroyed. People's homes have been targeted. So all these processes have been almost neglected in many conversations about destruction in Syria.

**Gemma:** For Ammar, domicile is about more than the destruction of physical buildings. He gave me the example of a fire that swept through the city council of Homs in July 2013, destroying lots of land and property records.

**Ammar:** The government would say that this has been like a target by the opposition, for instance, or they would say by accident there has been a flood in a different city where these documents are kept. So there is a threat against the documents that show that people own properties in the country.

**Gemma:** The loss of property documents can have significant long term consequences. The Syrian conflict has resulted in one of the largest forced displacement crises in recent history. More than 12 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes. Around half are displaced inside Syria and the other half live as refugees in neighboring countries. So, when people decide to return to their homes, those whose legal documents have been destroyed or lost will struggle to prove that they are the rightful owners.

**Ammar:** When the time comes for reconstruction, and they are asked to provide evidence that they have a property, maybe at that time, if they couldn't have enough time to provide evidence, it would be a process for the government and their supporters and allies to say that we have not received any evidence that people have a property here. It's a change of demography, it's a continuous cycle of violence, it's a different form of violence to say that these people have left and they don't have any evidence that they own anything here.

**Gemma:** There are other more subtle ways to destroy neighborhoods too. In the cities of Damascus and Hama, Ammar says that the Syrian regime has issued new planning decrees which lead to the erasure of entire neighborhoods.
Ammar: We have also seen new land and property laws and decrees by the government to say that certain neighborhoods in Syria are labeled as “informal”, between brackets. And during the years of wars, they have started to demolish complete neighborhoods in the name of applying these laws. So we have really seen like many different forms of weaponization of the built environment through the years of wars. Not only, as what they often term as like a war on terror, but also by making it look like a legal process of demolishing, erasing, destroying what they call informal houses. Even though there are so many different neighborhoods for pro regime allies who are also within the same label of being illegal or informal, but they are kept intact.

Gemma: You mention in your work, in other cities, say Mosul in Iraq and Misrata in Libya, which have also experienced a form of domicile. And currently as we’re talking, Israeli forces have been heavily bombing Gaza, one of the most densely populated places on the planet. We've seen images coming out of that of destruction of homes, of schools, mosques. How does what's happening in Gaza compare to what happened in Homs? Do you think it's a form of domicile?

Ammar: I've been just like looking at the news all the time since the Hamas attack on the 7 of October, and I just couldn't stop like looking at the updates all the time, and the heavy bombing of Gaza all the time, the scale of destruction, the scale of mass displacement.

Newsclip

Gemma: According to Israeli authorities, 1,400 people were killed in the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7. More than 5,400 were injured and more than 220 taken hostage. According to the health authorities in Hamas-run Gaza, as of October 25th, more than 6,500 people have been killed in strikes by the Israel Defense Forces, more than 17,400 injured, and over half a million displaced. Israel insists that its attacks on Gaza are targeting Hamas positions.

Ammar: So somehow it is an open prison and people in that open prison have been pushed away from their homes and you can see the same language that happens in every massive attack where the attacker would say we are going to follow, quote unquote, like precise targets to destroy the terrorists. But in that process, you can see it's the opposite. It's destroying people's lives, it's destroying people's homes.

Gemma: So you would definitely describe it as domicile by your definition of the term?
Ammar: It's absolutely domicidal, it's deliberate targeting for people's homes, it's absolutely like killing of people, civilian people, killing of their everyday life. Mass destruction of neighborhoods as we have seen in the coming videos. Entire buildings have been like leveled and this cycle is just continuous when there's no end of occupation.

Gemma: What are the long term psychological effects experienced by survivors of domicile? What does it mean to somebody to lose those familiar landmarks, their streets, their buildings, their squares, their mosques, their homes?

Ammar: I think this is a very important question and very often it's not talked about and I feel when we hear about like 1 million people being ordered to leave their homes without any understanding that these people have attachment to their places, they have attachment to their neighborhoods, to their streets, and the impact of displacement and loss of home can live with people for their lifetime. So in my interviews, I have heard many people saying that in Homs, for instance, when they are still living in the city, but they feel like strangers in their own city. Even though they haven't left their city, even some people haven't left their home, but they feel that they are strangers or they are exiled inside their own city. And I feel like for people like the Palestinian diaspora or the Iraqi diaspora or the Syrian diaspora, who are unable to return to their home countries, that suffering and pain and trauma of displacement continues. And I imagine, people have different mechanisms to cope with these traumatic events, but I feel that's why it's so important to have memory projects where people at least can heal and remember and grieve and reflect on what happened even when sadly many people are unable to return until like some people spend their lifetime in exile.

Gemma: Do you hope to go back one day? And what is your hope for the city as it kind of tries to rebuild and find a new path, away from this destruction?

Ammar: I do think about the question of return almost every day. And every day I think like, maybe it's time to return or visit. It's been more than 12 years, but I still have the fear inside of myself to return and it's still a place that it's unsafe and it's still a place where the country is still divided and there has been no political change. There has been no system of justice, so it's still a dangerous place to be. And my hope for the future is just like to have a city where people have justice and freedom and they live in dignity. Homs historically has been a beautiful city, a generous city, and a kind city. And I just want to see people are able to return if they wish to, and people are able to build their cities by their hands and for a place where everyone who can feel they can belong and live in freedom and justice there.
Gemma: Well, thank you so much, Ammar, for sharing your research with us.

That's it for this episode. Thanks to Ammar Azzouz for talking to us about his research and to Paul Keaveny at The Conversation in the UK. Ammar has written a couple of articles for The Conversation over the years and we'll put some links to those in the show notes. The Conversation's editors around the world continue to search out experts to provide analysis on the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza. We’ll put some links to that coverage in the show notes too.

This episode of The Conversation Weekly was written and produced by Mend Mariwany and me, Gemma Ware, with assistance from Katie Flood. I’m the show's executive producer. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

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