

The Mosque, the Missiles, and the Mapmakers: Forensic Architecture's Role in Assessing Precaution under International Law

By Jessica de Jong

When the Al-Jinah Mosque in Syria was reduced to rubble by a U.S. airstrike in 2017, official narratives insisted that only an Al-Qaeda meeting hall had been targeted. Enter Forensic Architecture, a cutting-edge investigative agency that fuses technology, spatial analysis, and human rights advocacy to challenge state narratives. By transforming battlefield incidents into detailed visual narratives, Forensic Architecture reshapes how we assess compliance with the laws of war. Yet, its work exists at a crossroads: Is it a groundbreaking tool for justice or an advocacy-driven challenge to traditional legal standards?

Introduction

In the early hours of March 16, 2017, the Al-Jinah Mosque in northern Syria became a smoldering ruin, the site of a deadly airstrike conducted by U.S. forces.¹ The Pentagon defended the operation, claiming the target was a building hosting an Al-

Qaeda meeting, and maintained that the mosque itself was spared.²

However, Forensic Architecture, a research agency that blends cutting-edge technology and architectural analysis to reconstruct scenes of violence, fiercely contested this explanation. The organisation's investigation claimed the strike not only targeted the mosque, but also failed to take sufficient precautions to avoid civilian casualties, thus violating International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

But how exactly does Forensic Architecture impact assessments of precaution under international law, particularly in cases like Al-Jinah?

The answer lies at the intersection of technology, law, and advocacy, where science meets storytelling—sometimes with remarkable clarity, and other times with contentious results.

What is Forensic Architecture?

Forensic Architecture (FA), based at Goldsmiths, University of London, employs innovative techniques to investigate state and corporate violence. Its

¹ Forensic Architecture, *Airstrikes on the Al-Jinah Mosque* <<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/airstrikes-on-the-al-jinah-mosque>> accessed 28 January 2025.

² Department of Defense, 'Pentagon Spokesman: Dozens of Terrorists Believed

Killed in US Strike in Syria' (U.S. Department of Defense, 23 March 2017) <<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1122791/pentagon-spokesman-dozens-of-terrorists-believed-killed-in-us-strike-in-syria/>> accessed 28 January 2025.

interdisciplinary team of architects, software developers, filmmakers, investigative journalists, scientists, and lawyers works across human rights, journalism, architecture, academia, and the law.

By combining 3D modelling, geospatial analysis, and witness testimony, FA reconstructs violent events to investigate human rights violations and environmental crimes³. These reconstructions inform advocacy campaigns, legal proceedings, and media narratives, pushing boundaries in evidence gathering and presentation.

The organisation has been widely recognised for its groundbreaking approach.

In 2022, the Peabody Awards lauded FA for co-creating ‘an entire new academic field and emergent media practice’, and in 2024, the European Research Council hailed its work as ‘a scientific breakthrough’ that reshaped investigative paradigms⁴⁵.

Beyond its core investigations, FA supports global initiatives through the Investigative Commons, a network of practitioners with a physical hub in Berlin hosted by its sister agency Forensis.⁶

Forensic Architecture’s approach is undeniably innovative.

By simulating attacks in virtual space and cross-referencing against physical and testimonial evidence, they aim to expose violations of IHL principles such as distinction, proportionality, and precaution.

However, their work is not without controversy.

Critics argue that their methods and sources—often unverifiable and politically charged—can lead to biased or unreliable conclusions. This tension is particularly evident in their work on the Al-Jinah airstrike.

The Case of the Al-Jinah Mosque

In their investigation of the Al-Jinah airstrike, Forensic Architecture collaborated with Human Rights Watch and other organisations to challenge the official US narrative. Their analysis included geospatial and architectural analysis, using satellite imagery and architectural layouts to demonstrate that the targeted building was part of the mosque complex, contradicting US claims. Testimonies from local witnesses were synchronised with visual data to reveal significant civilian casualties, providing a comprehensive timeline of the attack. FA argued that the US failed to adequately verify the target’s nature and mitigate harm to civilians. They highlighted discrepancies in the Pentagon’s targeting procedures, including the omission of the building’s religious significance and civilian use.

³ Forensic Architecture, *NGO Monitor* <<https://ngo-monitor.org/ngos/forensic-architecture/>> accessed 28 January 2025.

⁴ Counterfactual Art Archive, ‘Forensic Architecture’ <<https://counterfactualartarchive.com/artist/forensic-architecture/>> accessed 28 January 2025.

⁵ Peabody Awards, ‘Forensic Architecture’ <<https://peabodyawards.com/forensicarchitecture/>> accessed 28 January 2025.

⁶ Forensic Architecture, *Forensis* <<https://forensic-architecture.org/programme/exhibitions/forensis>> accessed 28 January 2025.

Relevance under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

Under IHL, the principle of precaution requires parties to a conflict to take all feasible measures to verify that targets are military objectives and to minimise harm to civilians (Article 57 of Additional Protocol I)⁷.

Precaution is assessed ex-ante—based on what was known or should have been known at the time of the attack. Forensic Architecture’s work directly impacts this assessment by reconstructing events ex-post. Their analyses challenge official narratives and raise important questions:

Did the attackers take all feasible steps to verify the target?

Were measures taken to mitigate harm to civilians, such as timing the strike to avoid peak civilian presence?

Was the harm caused proportionate to the anticipated military advantage?

In the Al-Jinah case, Forensic Architecture contended that the US failed to meet these requirements, thus violating IHL.

Innovative or Controversial? The Double-Edged Sword of Forensic Architecture

Forensic Architecture is undeniably a game-changer, yet its impact is far from straightforward.

On the one hand, it raises the bar for accountability, providing independent and often damning assessments of military operations that challenge state narratives and expose potential breaches of

International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Its forensic rigor—melding spatial analysis, open-source intelligence, and synchronized witness testimony—establishes an investigative gold standard, transforming murky battlefield events into detailed, almost cinematic reconstructions.

By bringing these findings to light, FA doesn’t merely document; it provokes, pressuring states to rethink their precautionary measures and tightening the screws on compliance with IHL.

But even a sharp tool can cut both ways. Critics argue that FA’s work, for all its innovation, occasionally trades impartiality for advocacy, relying on contested sources and politically charged language—terms like “apartheid” or “genocide” that can polarize rather than persuade.

Then there’s the inherent tension in its retrospective gaze: while FA reconstructs events with painstaking detail, its ex-post analyses risk setting impossibly high standards for military actors operating in the chaos of real time. Precision, after all, is easier to demand with the benefit of hindsight.

Finally, for all its cinematic flair and public appeal, FA’s work doesn’t always translate seamlessly into the dry, procedural world of legal proceedings, where evidentiary thresholds remain stubbornly high.

In this, it may dazzle the court of public opinion but struggle to meet the exacting standards of an actual courtroom.

Conclusion: A Tool for Justice, Not the Final Verdict

Forensic Architecture has undeniably started to reshape how we approach

⁷ Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating

to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (8 June 1977), Article 57.

accountability under IHL, turning the microscope onto state actions and amplifying voices too often silenced. In cases like the Al-Jinah airstrike, its reconstructions not only challenge official narratives but also highlight the urgent need for greater transparency and precaution in warfare.

However, its work is not without its limitations. The line between advocacy and analysis is delicate, the power of hindsight can distort expectations, and the “CSI Effect” reminds us that even the most sophisticated visuals are no substitute for critical scrutiny³.

Ultimately, Forensic Architecture is best viewed as a tool for justice, not as the final verdict. Its greatest strength lies in contributing to the broader mosaic of accountability and legal evolution, not in being the definitive arbiter of truth.

Like any tool, it demands careful use and a clear-eyed understanding of its boundaries.