

Israel's 'Scholasticide' in Gaza: The Systematic Wiping Out of the Entire Educational System

We the undersigned academics and intellectuals are deeply concerned by the Israeli army's pervasive targeting of academics, educational institutions, and cultural heritage sites in the Gaza Strip.

Schooling and learning are the fabric of organized human life all over the world, but in an occupied society the role and power of education are lifesaving, as they offer an effective tool of hope and freedom against policies of oppression, separation and impoverishment. Education nurtures a people's culture - and an occupied people's liberation - and is fundamental for individual as well as collective prosperity.

We see it as our humane and professional duty to raise our voices as academics to shed light and condemn this particular manifestation of Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, ongoing since 7 October 2023.

The Israeli military attacks on Gaza have completely disrupted the educational process in all its dimensions with serious long-term implications. Whether targeting academic, scientific, and intellectual figures in specific air raids on their homes without prior notice; killing hundreds of teachers and thousands of students; or destroying and damaging an estimated 70% of all colleges and universities in the Strip.

Six universities in the Gaza Strip (the Islamic University, Al-Israa, Al-Rabat College, Al-Azhar, Al-Aqsa and Al-Quds) have been either completely or partially destroyed.

On the very first days of war, on October 11, the Israeli Air Force completely destroyed the Islamic University in Gaza City, one of the oldest and most respected higher education institutions in the besieged enclave, making it clear that Palestinian spaces of education production and circulation were a precise target. This was done despite international humanitarian law prohibiting deliberate attacks on civilians; requiring combatants to always distinguish between civilian and military objects; and affording special protection to educational institutions and cultural property.

Israel's army also completely destroyed Al-Israa University's buildings, libraries, and laboratories on 17 January, after converting the school into military barracks and then in a temporary detention center. On the same military operation, it destroyed the National Museum located in Al-Israa and housing over 3,000 rare antiquities that, as claimed by an official statement of the university administration, have been stolen by the Israeli army.

The destruction of 70% of colleges and universities in the Gaza Strip is predicted to cost Gaza's education sector \$720 million according to estimates from the International Monetary Fund.

Additionally, three university presidents and more than 95 university deans and professors have been killed, while 88,000 students have been forced to interrupt their university education and 555 students granted with international scholarships were not able to travel abroad due to the violence.

Moreover, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Education, more than 4,327 students have been killed and 7,819 others injured, while 231 teachers and administrators have been killed and 756 injured during the ongoing attacks.

The targeted academics studied and taught across a variety of academic disciplines, they were part of Palestinian spaces of culture production and circulation, and many of their ideas served as cornerstones of academic research in the Gaza Strip's universities.

Israel's assault may amount to an epistemicide - meaning the killing, silencing, and annihilation of the Palestinian knowledge system - and it will affect the futures of these young adults as well as entire generations of Palestinian children to come.

The targeting of civilian objects by armed forces, particularly those that are historical or cultural artifacts protected by special laws, is not only a serious breach of international humanitarian law and a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, but it also falls under the purview of the crime of genocide.

Every school should be a protected space to share knowledge, foster critical thinking and awareness, especially during wars and emergencies, when education can mitigate the psychosocial impact of conflict by creating stability, interaction with peers and trusted adults, structure, and hope for the future.

We call on higher education institutions, scholars, and academics all over the world to:

- Raise their voices unequivocally against Israel's killings of academics as well as the widespread and intentional destruction of Palestinian cultural and historical properties - including universities, schools, libraries, and archives - in the Gaza Strip;
- Shed light on this particular manifestation of Israel's genocidal war, designed to destroy Palestinians physically and culturally as a group and render the area further uninhabitable to force them out of the Strip, i.e. organizing seminars and conferences, researching on this topic, talking about this in class etc.;
- Boycott complicit Israeli academic institutions, in particular those universities who were built on occupied land and within Israeli settlements, as they normalize the apartheid policies towards the Palestinians, their gradual ethnic cleansing and the occupation of the Palestinian territory.

Signatories:

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2. Thomas Lacroix, CNRS research fellow in geography at Migrinter, University of Poitiers, France.
3. Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relations, SOAS, University of London.