

Scholasticide in Gaza: Universities in ruins, but Gazans fight to keep education alive



By Maryam Qarehgozlou / PRESS TV

In the predawn hours of Monday, an Israeli military airstrike struck a school-turned-shelter in Gaza City, igniting a devastating fire that claimed the lives of at least 36 Palestinians, including several children.

The overnight attack targeted the Fahmi al-Jarjawi school in Gaza City's Daraj neighborhood, according to Civil Defense spokesman Mahmud Bassal.

The Israeli military claimed in a statement on Monday that the site was a control center for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad resistance movement, allegedly housing "key terrorists," though no evidence was provided to substantiate this claim.

Contradicting the military's statement, Bassal confirmed that the school was serving as a refuge for hundreds of people displaced due to the ongoing genocidal war on the besieged territory, with the majority of casualties being children and women, and dozens more injured.

Harrowing footage showed classrooms engulfed in flames where displaced families had been sleeping, a lone 5-year-old girl wandering amid the blaze, and frantic efforts by people outside to break windows and offer aid.

Over the course of the 19-month genocidal war on Gaza, the indiscriminate Israeli bombardment has not only resulted in the tragic loss of more than 53,000 Palestinian lives but has also severely damaged vital civilian infrastructure.

Notably, schools, universities, and other cultural and educational spaces, many of which primarily serving as shelters for displaced individuals, have suffered extensive destruction.

Reports indicate that nearly every school and university building in Gaza has been damaged or destroyed, with none currently operational.

Researchers associated with 'Scholasticide in Gaza' describe the "systematic" targeting of Gaza's educational sector and cultural institutions as a continuation of the Israeli regime's "scholasticidal practices," first established during previous assaults on the besieged territory in 2008 and 2014.

"This is part of a well-established, long-standing pattern of deliberate attacks against the creation of knowledge and cultural heritage," they emphasize, "carried out as a component of colonial occupation policies aimed at deterring Palestinian resistance."

'Scholasticide in Gaza' is a new project launched by a group of researchers along with students at the University of Chicago with two-fold purpose, according to their website.

"On the one hand, it aims to provide a comprehensive record of Israel's campaign of scholasticide in Gaza. Rather than treating this campaign in abstract isolation, we situate it within the larger history of Israeli colonial aggression toward Palestinian education, culture, and peoplehood," it stated.

"On the other hand, this project pays tribute to the steadfastness of Palestinian students, parents, academics, and educators. In short, the story this project tells is not simply one of Zionist destruction. It is equally a story of Palestinian resistance, resilience, and refusal to surrender in the face of overwhelming odds."

Education in pre-war Gaza

Before Israel launched its genocidal war on October 7, 2023, the Gaza Strip was home to 796 schools and 12 higher education institutions, alongside numerous libraries, archives, bookstores, museums, and publishing houses.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of October 27, 2023, Gaza had over 625,000 pupils and more than 22,500 teachers.

Gaza also boasted one of the world's lowest illiteracy rates at just 1.8 percent, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2018.

More than one-third of Gaza's population was school and university students, and Palestinian graduates consistently achieved high marks in fields such as mathematics, engineering, and business.

Since the escalation of the Gaza onslaught, schools and universities across Gaza have been forced to close, bombed and destroyed, and repurposed as shelters for displaced Palestinians.

No student in Gaza has attended school since November 6, 2023, when the Ministry of Education suspended the 2023–2024 academic year due to the war, which has seen indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, including offices and schools.

Over the past 85 weeks of the devastating conflict, all of Gaza's universities have been reduced to rubble by Israeli airstrikes. UN experts report that more than 85 percent of schools in Gaza have been completely or partially destroyed.

According to the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, Israel systematically destroyed every university in Gaza in stages. The first phase targeted the Islamic and Al-Azhar universities.

Israa University, located in the southern part of Gaza City, was demolished by Israeli forces. University officials stated that Israel occupied and used the campus as a military base and detention facility for months before its destruction.

In addition to physical destruction, Israel has carried out assassinations of Palestinian academics, mass arrests of students, and controlled demolitions of educational facilities, further crippling Gaza's academic landscape.

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor reported that three university presidents and over 95 university deans and professors, including 68 full professors, have been killed in Israeli airstrikes over the past 60 days of the genocidal war.

The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced in April that nearly 14,800 students have been killed and 24,800 wounded since the start of the Israeli war on Gaza.

Additionally, 724 students have been detained by the occupying forces. The ministry also reported that 880 teachers and administrators have been killed, with 23,936 more wounded.

Euro-Med emphasized that, given the vast scale of destruction to both life and property, returning to academic life after the war will be extremely challenging.

By the end of January 2024, Israel's offensive had caused approximately \$341 million in damage to Gaza's educational infrastructure, including schools and university buildings.

Why Is Israel Targeting Education in Gaza?

Rights groups and aid agencies around the world have repeatedly warned that Israel is systematically and intentionally destroying all universities and schools in Gaza.

"Given its centrality to Palestinian identity and struggle, it is unsurprising that education has been a consistent target of Zionism's settler-colonial violence," wrote the group of student researchers from the University of Chicago.

Their website *Scholasticide in Gaza* on UChicago Voices, a University of Chicago platform, documents the destruction of Palestinian higher education by Israel during the ongoing genocide and honors the professors and students who lost their lives during this period.

“Determined to erase Palestinians from history and deny them a future on their homeland, the Israeli occupation has engaged in a decades-long pattern of looting and destroying Palestinian libraries and archives; repressing and imprisoning Palestinian academics; criminalizing Palestinian student unions; torturing student activists; and raiding, bombing, and imposing closures on Palestinian schools and universities,” the group said.

They noted that Israel’s assaults on Palestinian education have reached an “unprecedented height” since October 2023, during which it has carried out a “campaign of scholasticide” in Gaza.

“At no point in history has a people’s educational system been so comprehensively destroyed within such a short timeframe,” they added.

In mid-May 2024, a video circulated showing an Israeli soldier filming the ruins of Al-Azhar University while celebrating its destruction.

“We are at a university in Gaza. If you want to sign up, if you want to learn, I think they’re closed for construction. Yes, they’re closed for construction. How beautiful. Another angle of the ruins... [Do] you want to sign up? We’re starting a new semester. It’ll start never,” he said as he recorded the scene.

A timeline of scholasticide in Gaza

Over the past 19 months, Israel has launched numerous attacks on Gaza’s educational and cultural institutions, including schools, universities, and libraries.

These indiscriminate bombardments have resulted in significant loss of life, including students and academics.

The Israeli regime has also intensified crackdowns on students and academics who speak out against its genocidal actions in Gaza.

The following list highlights a selection of Israeli strikes on educational and cultural institutions in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

October 2023

On October 9, the assault commenced with the destruction of the Islamic University of Gaza’s library.

October 10 saw the bombing of the iconic Samir Mansour Bookshop and Library, previously demolished during the 2021 Israeli assault.

October 11 marked the extensive bombing of the Islamic University of Gaza’s campus, damaging its mosque and main buildings. Al-Azhar University also came under attack.

In mid-October, Al Nuseirat refugee camp was targeted, resulting in the tragic death of Al-Shaima Akram Saidam, Palestine’s top high school student in 2023, alongside family members.

On October 17, an Israeli airstrike targeted an UNRWA school in the Al-Maghazi refugee camp, Gaza Strip, killing six Palestinians and injuring dozens, including UNRWA staff. Approximately 4,000 people had sought refuge in the school since the Gaza war’s onset.

On October 19, the University College of Applied Sciences faced Israeli military’s bombardment.

October 23 saw the arrest of Imad Barghouti, a renowned astrophysicist and Al-Quds University professor, leading to his imprisonment without charge or trial.

November 2023

Throughout November 2023, the Israeli military persisted in attacking Gaza's education sector:

In early November Al-Aqsa University was damaged, and videos showed Al-Azhar University being bombed, with reports indicating partial or complete destruction of its campus.

On November 3, Israel bombed Osama bin Zaid School in Al-Saftawi area north of Gaza City killing 20 and injuring many. UNRWA said that at least 1,000 people have taken refuge in school since the beginning of the war.

On 4 November, the Israeli attack on Al-Fakhoora school, a UN-run school in the Jabalia refugee camp, killed fifteen and wounded dozens more.

On November 9, an Israeli airstrike on Al-Buraq School in the Al-Nasr neighborhood, north of Gaza City, killed at least 50, including children.

On November 15, the Gaza branch building of Al-Quds Open University was destroyed. Days later, the university condemned Israel's attacks and criticized the previous use of the facility as a military barracks.

On November 17, an Israeli attack on Al-Falah School in the Al-Zeitoun neighborhood killed at least 20 people, with rescue efforts delayed due to a communications blackout.

The following day, November 18, a second attack on Al-Fakhoora School resulted in at least 50 fatalities.

On November 23, an Israeli airstrike targeted the Abu Hussein School in Jabalia camp, killing at least 27 people and causing multiple injuries.

Then, on November 25, the Diana Tamari Sabbagh Library, which was sheltering displaced Palestinians, was demolished. On November 29, Gaza City's Central Archives, home to over 150 years of historical documents, was destroyed.

December 2023

In December 2023, Gaza University was extensively bombed on the 4th, leading to its complete destruction. Just two days later, on December 6, six scholarly institutions in Gaza City were reportedly destroyed.

These included Enaim Library, the Kana'an Educational Development Institute and its community library, Lubbud Library, Al-Nahda Library, Al-Shorouq Al-Daem Library, and the Al-Quds Open University Library.

On December 7, the Othman bin Qashar Mosque in Gaza City's Zeitoun neighborhood was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes.

On December 8, the 7th-century Omari Mosque, along with its library housing rare books dating back to before the 14th century, was destroyed.

In mid-December, an Israeli airstrike on Haifa School in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, killed at least 20 people who were seeking refuge.

In late December, an attack on Al-Aqsa University claimed the lives of 20 Palestinians sheltering inside.

January 2024

On January 17, it was revealed that Al-Israa University, Gaza's last remaining university, had been destroyed after being used as an Israeli military base.

On January 25, Al-Aqsa University's Khan Yunis campus suffered severe damage from Israeli tank incursions.

February 2024

In early February, two Al-Aqsa University buildings were destroyed in Gaza City.

April 2024

On April 18, Palestinian legal scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian was arrested and abused by Israeli forces for criticizing the Gaza genocide during a podcast.

May 2024

On May 6, 160 Palestinian students enrolled in Israeli universities faced disciplinary action over pro-Palestine social media posts.

In late May, photos and footage surfaced showing Israeli soldiers burning books, including the holy Qur'an.

Bombed buildings at Al-Aqsa University's Khan Yunis campus. (Photo Reuters)
June 2024

On June 6, an Israeli strike on Al-Sardi School in the Nuseirat refugee camp killed 32 people, including 7 children.

On June 20, the Palestinian Ministry of Education announced that 39,000 students in Gaza were barred from taking the Tawjihi final exams, with 450 high school students having been killed in the past year.

July 2024

On July 6, an Israeli attack on UNRWA's Al-Jaouni School in al-Nuseirat camp, central Gaza, killed 16 Palestinians and injured 50 others.

A day later, on July 7, the Holy Family School in Gaza City was struck by an Israeli airstrike.

On July 9, the Israeli military bombed Al-Awda School near Khan Yunis, resulting in 31 deaths and 53 injuries, mostly women and children.

On July 14, an Israeli strike on Abu Oraiban School in central Gaza killed 22 people and wounded 100.

On July 16, an Israeli airstrike on al-Razi School in the Nuseirat refugee camp killed at least 42 people.

On July 26, the Khadija School airstrike in central Gaza killed 30 people, including 7 minors, with 100 casualties reported.

On July 27, at least 30 people were killed by an Israeli airstrike on a school in Deir al-Balah.

August 2024

On August 4, Israel bombed Hamama School in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood of Gaza, killing 17 people.

On the same day, an Israeli airstrike on Hassan Salame School in the Nassr neighborhood of Gaza City killed at least 30 people.

On August 10, an Israeli airstrike targeted Al-Tabaeen School in eastern Gaza City, a shelter for approximately 6,000 displaced Palestinians.

The strike killed 100 and injured 47 individuals gathered for morning prayers. Rescue efforts to extinguish the fire were hindered after the Israeli military cut off the region's water supply.

On August 20, an Israeli airstrike killed at least 12 people at Mustafa Hafez School in Gaza City.

On August 21, an Israeli airstrike struck Salah al-Din School west of Gaza City, killing at least four people.

On August 25, viral footage surfaced showing Israeli forces desecrating the Qur'an and mosques.

September 2024

On September 11, an Israeli bombardment of the UN-run Al-Jaouni School in the Nuseirat refugee camp, central Gaza, killed 18 and wounded 44, including six UN workers among the casualties.

On September 21, an Israeli strike on a school in the Zeitoun area of Gaza City killed at least 22 people and injured another 30.

On September 26, an airstrike on Hafsa al-Faluja School in the Jabalia refugee camp killed at least 15 people.

October 2024

On October 10, an Israeli airstrike on Rufaida al-Aslamia School in Deir al-Balah killed at least 28 people and injured 54.

On October 17, the Abu Hussein School in Jabalia was bombed, killing at least 28 people, including multiple children.

On October 19, an Israeli airstrike on Asmaa School in Gaza's Al-Shati refugee camp in Beit Lahia killed at least 73 people.

On October 22, Israeli bombardment of the Zayd ibn Haritha School, converted into a shelter in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza, killed at least seven Palestinians.

On October 24, an Israeli airstrike on Al-Shuhada School in the Nuseirat refugee camp killed at least 17 people.

November 2024

On November 4, Israel ended its ties with UNRWA, impacting education for over 660,000 Palestinian children.

April 2025

On April 3, an Israeli airstrike on Dar al-Arqam School in Tuffah killed at least 27 Palestinians, including women and children.

May 2025

On May 12, at least 16 Palestinians, including five children, were killed in an Israeli airstrike targeting Fatima Bint Assad School in the Jabalia refugee camp.

On May 19, Israeli airstrikes on Al-Hasayna School in the Nuseirat refugee camp killed at least five people and injured several others, including children.

On May 20, ten people, including children and a pregnant woman, were killed in an Israeli airstrike on Musa bin Nusair School in Gaza City.

On May 26, an Israeli airstrike on Fahmi Al-Jarjawi School in Gaza City sparked a massive fire, resulting in the deaths of at least 36 people, among them 18 children.

Education as a form of defiance

Despite shattered classrooms, disrupted internet access, and the constant threat of death or displacement, Palestinian students and teachers refuse to give up their hopes and futures to Zionism's exterminatory logic.

Students and educators persevere by developing remote learning programs, establishing makeshift classrooms, and launching initiatives to restore Gaza's education system and rebuild its universities in the wake of Israel's genocidal onslaught.

In an interview with University of Chicago students documenting the scholasticide in Gaza, Associate Professor Ahmed Abu Shaban of Gaza's Al-Azhar University said despite personal losses, the devastation of Gaza's academic sector, displacement, threats, and targeted attacks that claimed the lives of academics, Gaza's scholars remain steadfast in refusing to let their institutions be erased.

Ahmed Abu Shaban is an Associate Professor of Agriculture and Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine at Gaza's Al-Azhar University.

Unable to rely on international aid, since higher education is often not prioritized, Al-Azhar University resumed operations in June 2024, setting an example for others, Abu Shaban said.

"Al-Azhar was the first to start with several challenges, but we just completed the first semester, the second semester, the third semester, and currently we are starting the fourth semester."

With limited resources, faculty taught from tents and without salaries. To sustain operations, the Emergency Committee of Gaza Universities was established, working alongside international NGOs to create scholarship funds.

According to Abu Shaban, despite ongoing financial hardships, resource shortages, and constrained teaching capacities, Gaza's academics continue to innovate and demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

Mkhaimar Abusada, Associate Professor of Political Science at Al-Azhar University and a visiting professor at Northwestern University, discussed the struggles faced by both students and professors within Gaza's war-torn education system.

Though based in the U.S., Abusada voluntarily teaches online to support his home university, where enrollment has drastically declined.

Mkhaimar Abusada, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza

According to Abusada, students in Gaza struggle with displacement, unreliable internet, and limited resources, all of which make it difficult to access lectures or participate effectively.

The ongoing war has only compounded the challenges of distance learning.

Despite these obstacles, Abusada seeks creative solutions, such as sharing lectures via WhatsApp, determined to keep education alive in Gaza against all odds.

Ohood Nassar, a writer who was set to complete her degree in education studies in June 2024 before the genocidal war began, saw her dreams shattered when her university—the Islamic University of Gaza—was bombed.

In April 2024, she applied to Birzeit University for online courses.

“It felt like a lifeline had been thrown to me when the acceptance email arrived. I was tremendously determined despite the appalling circumstances in northern Gaza and the impossible conditions for students across the territory,” she wrote in a letter published by the Electronic Intifada in September 2024.

After losing internet access, she was unable to take her exams, and I lost her place at Birzeit University.

When in June the Islamic University announced that it would resume online studies, she enrolled again, determined to continue despite all the obstacles.

“Every day is a battle to continue my studies. With terrible internet access, it often takes me nearly four hours to watch a lecture that lasts less than an hour,” Nassar wrote.

“My perspective on education has shifted: It is no longer just a personal goal but a form of resistance — a beacon of hope to me in the midst of this Israeli genocide.”

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