

Israel's slaughter of president of the Islamic University of Gaza triggers international protest

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The Israeli military continues to rain death and destruction down on the defenseless population of Gaza. The official death toll approached 20,000 yesterday, with more than 7,000 people reported missing. Among the recent victims is the president of the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), Dr. Sofyan Taya. Taya was slaughtered along with his wife and two children in the Jabaliya refugee camp, just north of Gaza City, on December 2.

Taya was a respected scholar and the president of the IUG, a post he took up this past August. The university was leveled in a targeted Israeli airstrike on October 11. It was bombed by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) during previous incursions into Gaza in 2014 and 2008 on the flimsy pretext that it contained “weapons labs.” As with much of the propaganda emanating from the Zionist regime and its imperialist backers in the US, Canada and Europe, evidence to back up this fanciful claim was not supplied.

Taya was a UNESCO Chair for Physical and Astrophysical Sciences. According to a 2021 report by Stanford University, he was among the top 2 percent of researchers in optics globally. His research focused on the fields of integrated optics for sensor applications, waveguides, ellipsometry, OLEDs, numerical techniques, nonlinear optics, applications of left-handed materials and photonic crystals, according to his profile on ResearchGate. He published hundreds of articles on these subjects and, according to Google scholar, he has been cited more than 3,700 times.

Israel has declined to comment on Dr. Taya's death. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Zionist regime is deliberately targeting academics, healthcare workers, journalists and anyone who can contribute to the basic functioning of society in a deliberate attempt to ethnically cleanse Gaza and force its

population to flee into Egypt's Sinai Desert. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously noted, the IDF's actions in the Gaza strip are, by any objective measure, in violation of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and constitute a textbook case of genocide.

Taya's murder occurred just days before the targeted assassination of Dr. Refaat al-Ar'eer on December 6. An English teacher and poet, he was also part of the faculty at IUG. His humane writings and frequent updates from the outset of the genocide garnered millions of views on social media and sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people, helping circumvent the embargo on reporting of the dire conditions in Gaza. His assassination silenced one of the Zionist regime's more vocal critics in Palestine.

The IDF has so far killed at least 90 journalists, according to an official statement released by Al Jazeera last week in response to the deliberate killing of cameraman Samer Abudaqa. Another prominent assassination of a journalist was the October 13 killing of Reuters photojournalist Issam Abdallah on the Israel-Lebanon border by an Israeli tank shell. No hostilities were reported in the area, as determined by a joint report by Reuters, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Agence France-Presse.

Taya was born in Gaza in the Jabaliya refugee camp in 1971. As is the case with so many Palestinians, he was educated in the UNRWA-run schools in Gaza. He completed his BA and Masters in physics at the IUG and worked as a teaching assistant at the university from 1994 until 2004. He obtained his PhD from Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt, in 2007. During this period he was arrested at Rafah crossing by the IDF in 2005 while traveling to Egypt to finish his PhD—a reminder of the fact

that Gaza is the “world’s largest open-air prison.”

From 2008 to 2013 he was an assistant professor of physics at the IUG and, from 2013 to 2018, an associate professor of physics. In 2018 he attained the position of a full professor of theoretical physics—optoelectronics. Commenting on his appointment at the time, he said, “I realized from the first moment that the university’s mission was not just teaching and graduating generations, but rather scientific research and community service which come prior to teaching as the university’s basic mission in scientific research.” This observation reveals a man whose commitment to research and scholarship was driven by a devotion to use science as a means for the betterment of humanity.

Israel’s killing of Taya has provoked outrage in the global academic community and has prompted protests by students. A candlelight vigil was held on Thursday, December 14 in his honour at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, where he was a visiting scholar from February 2021 to the spring of 2023. A letter penned by Justice for All Canada, a non-profit human rights advocacy group, has accumulated over 200 signatures from academics across the country. Written in the wake of Taya’s death, it calls on academic institutions in Canada to take a public stance on events in Gaza and advocate for a ceasefire.

Dr. Omar Ramahi, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at the University of Waterloo who co-authored 10 papers with Taya, told CTV that he was a kind and “gentle soul,” and that his death is “a major loss for the academic community.”

Echoing Ramahi’s comments, Mohammad Al-Sharman, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Waterloo, told CBC Kitchener, “Sofyan has been among the leaders in the subfield in electromagnetic and optics ... losing professors like Sofyan Taya... it’s a major loss.”

Sixteen student groups at the University of Waterloo issued a statement on Instagram last week calling for the “University of Waterloo to issue an official statement honouring the life of Professor Sofyan Taya, condemning the intentional Israeli attacks on academic institutions including the airstrike on the universities of Gaza, and condemning the genocide Israel is committing in Gaza.” The post has garnered over 2,700 likes on the platform over the weekend.

University management has no intention of meeting these demands. It is instructive to compare the response of the university to the US-instigated Russian invasion of Ukraine with its reaction to the genocide in Gaza. Within

a week of Russia’s reactionary invasion in February 2022, the university issued a statement declaring that the institution was “unwavering in our solidarity with the innocent victims of invasion, and we stand in support of those who are calling for an end to the invasion.” The statement went on to claim that “the University of Waterloo and all of academia play a vital role in preserving democracy by offering a safe place for free inquiry and preparing our students to be global citizens. The assault on Ukraine represents an assault on democracy and our deepest values.”

Evidently the assault on “academia” and “democracy” is only a concern when it is carried out by geopolitical rivals of Canadian imperialism. To date the university has issued no statement condemning Israel’s genocide. Insofar as Dr. Taya is concerned, the university merely managed to have a spokesperson reply to the CBC via email saying blandly, “The university is saddened by Dr. Taya’s passing and has reached out to offer support to those who knew him.”

There is mass outrage on a global scale to Israel’s genocidal onslaught in Gaza. The millions of workers, youth, and students who have taken to the streets around the globe over the past two months provide incontrovertible testament to this. The genocide will not be halted through appeals to the political representatives of the ruling class in the imperialist countries, including Canada, all of whom are implicated in Israel’s savage onslaught. The adoption of genocide as a tool of state policy is, in the final analysis, an expression of the crisis of the historically outmoded capitalist system. The capitalist solution to this crisis is war, dictatorship, and barbarism. This must be consciously opposed through the building of a mass anti-war movement in the working class armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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