

UN report documents Israel's relentless destruction of Palestinian education and culture

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A recent report by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, was presented to the Human Rights Council of the UN on June 17. The report, while taking note of Israel's ongoing murder and maiming of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel itself, focuses primarily on the destruction of educational and cultural institutions by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) since October 7, 2023.

The report was the subject of debate during the session of the Human Rights Council, its 59th, with representatives from the State of Palestine, South Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia, Brazil, Egypt, Cuba, Venezuela and others endorsing it.

A joint statement from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand reiterated purely verbal opposition to military action and human suffering in Gaza and claimed that the Commission of Inquiry was "biased." The European Union delegates expressed concern over the "catastrophic humanitarian situation" in Gaza but condemned Hamas's incursion into Israel on October 7.

The United States did not participate in the dialogue over the report and Israel does not recognize the legitimacy of the Commission of Inquiry. Taken together, these actions prevented the resolution from being officially adopted by the Human Rights Commission.

The report, however, is devastating, and deserves to be circulated and read widely. While it does not contain material that is new, and the various incidents have been previously reported in the world media, it fulfills two essential functions: First, it scrupulously assembles evidence that enables the world's population to understand the full scope and intent of Israeli government's actions in Gaza.

Second, by focusing on the deliberate destruction of Palestinian educational and cultural institutions in not only Gaza but also the West Bank, it highlights the course of a "sociocide"—"the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society"—*over and above* the relentless starvation, maiming, torture and killing of men, women and children. This "sociocide" includes the extensive destruction of education in Gaza and the West Bank and the wanton decimation of cultural sites in Palestine.

The report begins by noting the physical damage to the educational infrastructure by the Zionist state:

Between 7 October 2023 and 25 February 2025 in Gaza, 403 of a total of 564 school buildings were directly hit and sustained damage. Of those hit, 85 schools were fully destroyed and 73 schools lost at least half of their structures. Since 61 per cent of schools in Gaza had been operating on double or triple shifts, each school building destroyed has affected hundreds and sometimes thousands of students. The 403 school buildings that were directly

hit had served approximately 435,290 students and 16,275 teachers. Between 7 October 2023 and 25 February 2025, 62 per cent of school buildings used as shelters were directly hit, resulting in significant numbers of casualties.

The destruction of higher education has also been devastating:

Higher education facilities were also targeted and destroyed or damaged, affecting about 87,000 university students. These included a campus of Al-Azhar University, demolished in December 2023, and a campus of Israa University, demolished in January. More than 57 university buildings had been completely destroyed as at 25 March 2025.

Critically, the Commission analyzed Israeli claims, when the Zionists bothered to make them, that these institutions were being used for military purposes, and it sought independently to ascertain their possible military use.

The Commission could not identify any military objective for the demolitions of educational facilities. It forensically verified the demolition of two schools in Beit Hanoun in the north of the Gaza Strip in mid-November 2023, the Beit Hanoun preparatory girls "B" school and the neighboring Beit Hanoun elementary co-educational "C" school. Those schools had served 2,400 students. Both schools were severely damaged through controlled demolitions.

These are war crimes according to the Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court, from which Israel withdrew its signature in 2002. These actions, on top of the murder of educators itself, fit the definition of "scholasticide" made by the group Scholars Against the War on Palestine (SAWP): "the systemic destruction, in whole or in part, of the educational life of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group," which, as the organization points out on its website, "has become a dangerous aspect of Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people."

The Commission was able to identify IDF units that were responsible for the destruction of educational institutions. The report makes it clear that the fascist ideology of the Netanyahu government and Zionist racism

generally lies behind the scholasticide:

Incidents of the demolition of educational facilities have been filmed by Israeli soldiers. Footage depicts them expressing celebratory or demeaning comments and jokes during or after demolitions. In one example, an Israeli soldier says in Hebrew: “For all those asking why there is no education in Gaza, oops a missile fell on you, that sucks, too bad. That is how you will not be engineers anymore.

The report cites repeated vandalism, including burning, of school facilities and the use of school facilities to store IDF munitions.

From October 7, 2023 to March 2025, the last date used by the report, the Gazan Health Ministry has reported that Israel had killed 15,615 children. But 658,000 of the children who remain alive have been denied a formal education, and, while there is some online learning, “the complex situation children have found themselves in,” the report notes, “has diverted children’s attention from education to a focus on survival amid attacks, uncertainty, starvation and subhuman living conditions. Children have also been increasingly forced to seek informal work.”

The report does not study the special educational needs of children who have lost arms or legs or have been harmed psychologically by Israeli attacks.

Scholasticide also continues on the West Bank, which has received far less attention than those in Gaza:

Some 806,000 primary and secondary school students have been affected by measures implemented by Israeli security forces in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Between 7 October 2023 and 25 March 2025, 141 schools were attacked and vandalized, 96 students and four educational staff were killed, 611 students and 21 education staff were injured, and 327 students and more than 172 educational staff were arrested. Closures, restrictions and military raids have resulted in a significant loss of school days during the school year 2023/24; in some areas, up to half of the school year was lost.

In addition, the very character of the military occupation of the West Bank and Jerusalem makes daily life for many students insufferable: “The Commission also received reports that some female students were afraid to pass through checkpoints to go to school, including a checkpoint in the H2 area of Hebron where incidents of Israeli soldiers exposing their genitals to women and girls had been reported.”

Settler violence has also had an impact. To cite only once incident from the report:

The Al-Kaabneh basic school in the village of Al-Mu’arrajat near Jericho was attacked [by far-right settlers] in September 2024. The attack took place when the school was in session. During the attack settlers beat a human rights activist who was filming the scene, while a large group of distraught schoolchildren barricaded themselves in a classroom with their teacher.

The report also delves into the attack on the democratic rights of students and educators in Israel itself. “Since October 2023, schools and universities in Israel have taken disciplinary action against students and

personnel, in many cases for expressing public sympathy or support for the people of Gaza ...” The report cites a number of cases of arrests and harassment of teachers and professors, both Palestinian and Jewish Israelis, for speaking out against the genocide.

To accompany the destruction of education, the IDF and other Israeli government agencies have also targeted Palestinian cultural institutions, according to the report.

As of 29 November 2024, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had verified damage to 75 sites in Gaza since 7 October 2023: 10 religious sites, 48 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, three depositories of movable cultural property, six monuments, one museum and seven archaeological sites ... such as Anthedon Harbour, a Roman cemetery, the Pasha Palace museum, the ancient Samaritan Bathhouse and the Great Omari Mosque.

In one case:

The Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Centre in the Rimal neighborhood was bombed twice, ... In addition, the building entrance was destroyed by bulldozers. The Centre was a vital cultural hub in Gaza, offering art and social activities for local residents. ... Israeli security forces provided no explanation for the attack. The Commission has previously reported on the Israeli security forces’ practice of attacking “power targets,” identified for symbolic value with no military necessity, and notes that the Centre may have been attacked under that practice.

One noteworthy finding of the report is an update on the well-known hijacking by Israeli authorities of cultural and archeological sites in the West Bank:

The Commission has documented many incidents in which Israeli officials have: seized or allowed settlers to seize cultural heritage sites; excavated, developed and expanded such sites for tourism purposes, including those containing artefacts representing various cultures and periods in history, while excluding non-Jewish history; and blocked or severely restricted Palestinians from accessing such sites ...

The creation and expansion of exclusively Jewish heritage sites in the West Bank including East Jerusalem, has become another form of settlement and annexation that excludes Palestinians by both limiting their access to their land and not recognizing their relationship to the land’s heritage and history.

The report also cites the repeated destruction by security forces and fascist settlers of religious institutions, including both mosques and churches. While the IDF often claims that such sites house Hamas fighters, the Commission was not able to verify this in a single case.

Often, the religious sites were full of worshippers or displaced civilians when they were destroyed, as happened on August 10, 2024, when

Israeli security forces attacked the Saad al-Ghafari Mosque, located in a complex shared by the Al-Taba’een school in the

Daraj area of central Gaza Strip, which was housing internally displaced persons. The attack took place at 4 a.m., during morning prayers, causing severe damage to the ground floor of the structure and killing at least 90 persons, including 11 children and 6 women.

In its conclusions on the destruction of educational institutions, the report notes:

The destruction of the education system in Gaza and the weakening of the education system across the Occupied Palestinian Territory generally have already had severe impacts on young persons' lives and will set their education back by years. This will, in turn, affect the development of the Occupied Palestinian Territory as a whole, including economic, political and social development, thereby undermining Palestinians' broader right to self-determination and extending the unlawful occupation by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

This conclusion fails to take into account that the goal of the Zionist regime, backed by the US and European powers, is the expulsion or extermination of the entire Palestinian population. This is the stage that imperialist barbarism has reached.

This report will be an essential exhibit in future war crimes trials of Israeli, American and European leaders.



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