

Scholasticide: The ongoing colonial attack on Palestinian Higher Education

Settler-colonialism seeks to weaken Indigenous communities, in part by preventing intellectual development.¹ Attacks on Palestinian educational institutions are as old as the formation of Israel. In 1948, Palestinian colleges and most Islamic and Christian educational institutions inside what later became Israel, were destroyed.² Between 1948 and 1967, development of higher education was suspended throughout historic Palestine, and when it started to evolve again in the 1970s, it came under attack by Israeli occupation authorities.³ Many attacks took place during the First Intifada, between 1987 and 1991.⁴ Attacks on education (including higher education) is dubbed “educide,” “epistemicide,” or “scholasticide” and is understood in the context of the colonial “logic of elimination” of Indigenous people.⁵

The recent scholasticide episode starting in Gaza

The Gaza Strip is located on Palestine’s southern Mediterranean coast, and shares borders with Egypt on Palestine’s southwestern corner. Over two-thirds of its 2.3 million people are refugees ethnically cleansed from areas that became “Israel” in 1948.⁶ The Strip was intentionally de-developed, economically evolving into a “concentration camp,” an “open-air prison,” or “laboratory.”⁷

In Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip in the past 20 years—in 2008-09, 2014, 2020, and 2021 (indeed, since the start of the occupation in 1967)—Gaza’s educational system suffered greatly, largely due to the difficulty of reconstruction resulting from either Israel’s blockade of

the Strip, or direct efforts to stop reconstruction.⁸ The attacks that started October 7, 2023 have been worse than earlier attacks and have not yet ended.⁹ There are pending cases of genocide and grave breaches of international law at the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court, which also involve deliberate attacks on higher education.¹⁰ Examples include videos and images showing Israeli troops rigging explosives inside universities and cheering as they blew up.¹¹

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has bombed all eleven of Gaza’s universities: the Arab College of Applied Sciences, the Islamic University of Gaza, the Palestine Technical College, the Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University, the Al-Quds Open University, the University College of Applied Sciences, the University of Palestine, Israa University, the University of Gaza, Palestine College of Nursing, and the Arab College of Applied Sciences. The Israeli onslaught has destroyed campuses, prevented students from accessing education, killed >650 university students and 111 faculty and staff from higher education institutions.¹²



Fig. 1 Al-Azhar University main building during and after their destruction (Sources: Wafa Palestine News & Info Agency (top) and The Palestinian Information Center (bottom)).

The dead include Professor Sufian Tayeh, President of the Islamic University of Gaza, UNESCO chair in astronomy, astrophysics, and space sciences in Palestine; Dr. Ahmed Hamdi Abo Absa, Dean of the University of Palestine’s software engineering department (following three days of custody), shot and killed by Israeli forces as he was leaving his campus building; Muhammad Eid Shabir, former president of the Islamic University of Gaza, a virologist and immunologist, assassinated by Israeli military forces; and Refaat Alareer, renowned poet and Professor of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at the Islamic University of Gaza, killed alongside members of his family.¹³

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Israel’s attacks since October 7 have not been limited to the Gaza Strip. The West Bank has been subjected to a lockdown, severely restricting movement between cities. West Bank universities have had to rely on online teaching.¹⁴ Israeli leaders are threatening to repeat what they have done in the Gaza Strip in other areas like the West Bank and Lebanon. As of this writing, it is not clear in what direction the Israeli scholasticide is heading.

How higher education institutions adapt and how they may be resuscitated

Pursuing education and building society are considered acts of resistance under Israeli occupation.¹⁵ In the course of previous uprisings, accompanied by Israeli attacks on higher education, institutions developed methods of education as ‘resistance tools.’ For example, when universities were forcibly closed during the 1987–91 Intifada, many universities held clandestine courses in teachers’ homes, mosques, and other community locations. Beginning with the 2000-2005 uprising, Palestinian higher education adapted to stressful situations by taking courses online.¹⁶ Higher education has been viewed through a nationalist lens, crucial for the achievement of national goals such as the Right of Return, liberation, and self-determination.¹⁷ Following Israel’s latest attack, faculty at Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities have issued a specific program of action.¹⁸

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While there are limits to what can be done for academia in Gaza in light of repeated attacks, some things can be done and have been done in the past to recuperate.¹⁹ Here are some actions that we propose are possible for universities outside and within Palestine:

1. Universities play a significant role in fostering capacity building, resilience and persistence (sumud) in preparation for what would be their normal role of helping economic development.²⁰
2. Scholars around the world have become involved and this must continue and expand.
3. Some groups offer safe haven for scholars at risk.²¹
4. Israeli universities are complicit and should be boycotted.²²
5. There are many universities around the world that succumb to Zionist intimidation and try to limit free speech and assembly or even expressions of support for Palestinian human rights.²³ This must be challenged.
6. Struggle to end the conflict based on justice and human rights including the right to education: Rebuilding cannot happen logically under continued occupation/colonization and repeated attacks on the Gaza strip.²⁴
7. Build hope via restructuring of educational systems (at all levels including higher education) in ways that instill pride in our heritage and in our struggle and hope for a future of freedom and self-determination. This includes working to encourage collective work, volunteerism, innovation, and creative thinking.
8. Educational institutions at all levels should offer holistic and community-based solutions.²⁵

9. A Palestinian multi-university should be established to help formulate a new national agenda and connect and ensure complementarity of Palestinian higher education so that when one part is under attack, other parts of the networked system can carry on.²⁶
10. While distance education is useful in some circumstances, it has to be structured well to produce the most effective result.²⁷ Further, there has to be a systematic approach to building capacity for digital education.²⁸

The systematic crimes of Israel's occupation have a broader goal of ethnic cleansing and erasure of Palestinian national identity.²⁹ Yet, despite the difficulties, there are many avenues for challenging this aspect of colonization. Palestinians value education. After every episode of colonial onslaught (after fourteen uprisings/intifadas), they have always managed to reconstruct and rebuild.³⁰ The same will happen in the wake of Israel's current assault on Gaza. Like South Africa's response to the Soweto uprising, Israel's current war on Gaza and the West Bank may be its last.



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Notes

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3. Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Universities Under Occupation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 127-133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537026>; Christa Bruhn, "Higher Education as Empowerment: The Case of Palestinian Universities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 8 (April 2006): 1125-1142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205284722>; Keith Hammond, "Palestinian Universities and the Israeli Occupation," *Policy Futures in Education* 5, no. 2 (June 2007): 264-270, <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2007.5.2.264>; Anwar Hussein, Shelley Wong, and Anita Bright, "History and Impact of Israeli Siege and Attacks on Education in Gaza, Palestine," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

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By Lowell Andrew Iporac

EVEN THE SEAS ARE CAGED:

Palestine's Coastal Areas Under Occupation

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Sea, next to the shorelines of Gaza, harbors marine life that sustains the local Indigenous Palestinians. The salty sea breeze and abundant fisheries breathe life into the coastal communities where Gazans would buy and sell seafood for subsistence for their families. The fishing harbor, where many of the fisherfolks' boats were docked, also harbored many roosting migratory birds such as black-headed gulls and common terns. This intergenerational connection of Palestinians to the ocean was so deep-rooted that it was represented by the fishing net pattern on the Palestinian Keffiyeh. The Palestinian Keffiyeh, in response to the Zionist occupation, developed into a symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance.

The coast of Gaza (and occupied Palestine as a whole) lies among the greater Levant region of the Mediterranean Sea Basin, which also includes Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. Marine fauna crossing the Gaza strip include iconic

species listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), such as the globally vulnerable leatherback sea turtle, the endangered spinetail devil ray, and the vulnerable ocean sunfish, the largest living bonefish in the world. Many Palestinian fishers are small-boat, artisanal fishers that fish for subsistence and use seine nets to catch sardines, mackerel, tuna, and amberjack.¹

Like the marine fauna that migrate along the Mediterranean, the fishing grounds of Palestinian fishers transcend political boundaries, often based on local practices that are passed down from generation to generation.² Even today, the Gazan fisher community holds local ecological knowledge, such as marine faunal strandings, fishery migration patterns, and ecological significance of fishery species.³ However, because of the occupation, the ecological knowledge of the Gazan fishers also included Israeli militarization effects on marine life and their fellow fishers.

