



The War on Gaza: The assault on Palestinian higher education

Fobzu Briefing No. 1

December 2023

The assault on Palestinian higher education

Students, academics, and universities in the firing line

Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, its military operations in the West Bank, and its policing inside the Green Line is having a devastating impact on Palestinian students, staff, and university/college campuses. Education has been interrupted, while in Gaza it has ceased completely. Many students and staff are being killed, while hundreds are being arrested or censored. University buildings are being destroyed. The impact on Palestinians' access to higher education and the Palestinian research community is enormous and will last far beyond any ceasefire. [1]

Israel's war on Gaza

On October 7, Israel launched its 5th major war on the Gaza Strip since it placed the occupied territory under illegal siege in 2007. So far, Israel has undertaken a massive bombing campaign, carried out military incursions, and instituted a total blockade preventing food, water, medicine, and fuel from entering. The devastation in Gaza is so enormous that Palestinian health agencies have [lost the ability to count the number of dead and wounded](#).

The [UN estimates](#), on 12 December, that over 18,205+ Palestinians have been killed, 49,645 injured, and 1.93 million have been displaced (over 80 percent of the population). More than half of Gaza's housing stock and critical infrastructure has been destroyed, and many essential services are out of service, including access to clean water and sanitation.

Increasing numbers of scholars, human rights organisations and UN officials are warning that [Israel's actions in Gaza may constitute a genocide](#).

[In the West Bank, Israel has killed 246 Palestinians since 7 October; on top of the 192 it killed from 1 January to 6 October](#). Israeli settler violence against Palestinians has also soared, with [some Palestinian communities being displaced](#). The [Israeli army has arrested 2,700 Palestinians in the West Bank, many of whom have reported experiencing torture](#). According to the [Right to Education Campaign](#) at Birzeit University at least 115 students have been arrested since 7 October.

Inside the Green Line, Palestinian citizens of Israel are experiencing a severe crackdown on their freedom of speech and assembly with [over 250 arrests, interrogations and "warning talks"](#) for mostly social media posts, but also for [peace demonstrations](#).

"The University calls on academic institutions, world universities, employees and their unions to stand by the Islamic University of Gaza and the Palestinian universities and to denounce the racist occupation attacks on the Palestinian educational and academic institutions."

The Islamic University of Gaza, [10 October 2023](#)

The impact on university students, and staff, 7 October – 12 December 2023

All universities in the Gaza Strip have ceased to operate. Students and staff have been displaced, have no access to internet, and [have had to completely end their studies, teaching, and research](#).

The West Bank is experiencing widespread interruption with most institutions [shifting to online teaching and support](#) to avoid campus invasions by the Israeli army, and students and staff being harassed, arrested, or shot by Israeli soldiers and armed Israeli settlers.

In Israeli universities, [Palestinian students and university staff](#), who are citizens of Israel, are experiencing [personal attacks](#), arrest, censorship, and disciplinary measures including [suspension, expulsion and dismissal](#). [Over 100 students have been expelled or suspended](#).

The Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education last reported on 5 November that [446 students](#) enrolled in universities and colleges in Palestine have been killed by Israel (438 in the Gaza Strip and eight in the West Bank) in addition to [14 employees](#) working in higher educational institutions in the Gaza Strip. These figures are expected to be much higher now.

[14 higher education institutions](#) have been partially or completely damaged (12 in the Gaza Strip and two in the West Bank).

On 9 October, the first day of Israel's bombardment, the buildings of the [Islamic University of Gaza were attacked causing extensive destruction](#). The cost of reconstructing Palestinian universities damaged by Israel's bombs will be enormous. On 3 December, world-leading scientist and President of the Islamic University, [Professor Sufyan Tayeh](#) was killed alongside his family when Israeli airstrikes hit his neighbourhood of al-Faluja. On 6 December, Palestinian poet, co-founder of the project 'We Are Not Numbers' and professor of English literature at the Islamic University, [Refaat Alareer](#) was killed when the house where he was staying was attacked.

10,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel study in Palestinian universities in the West Bank; at [least 250 of](#) them have left their studies and returned to their places of residence inside Israel.



Dr Sufyan Tayeh - President of the Islamic University of Gaza

Higher education in Palestine before the current crisis

"Birzeit University urges the international community to immediately intervene to stop this barbaric aggression and to protect Palestinians from the dramatic escalation of Israeli war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing throughout all of Palestine. The ongoing impunity granted by the international community to the Israeli occupying forces must end today."

Birzeit University, 15 October 2023

Palestine has 53 higher education institutions (35 in the West Bank and 17 in Gaza), and an open education university with centres in the West Bank and Gaza.

There are 226,000 Palestinian students enrolled in these institutions (139,000 in the West Bank and 87,000 in Gaza). 46,000 Palestinians graduated from these institutions in 2020/2021 (32,000 in the West Bank and 14,000 in Gaza).

Higher education in Palestine employs 17,000 staff (12,000 in the West Bank and 5,000 in Gaza), including 9,000 educational academics (7,000 in the West Bank and 2,000 in Gaza).

The Palestinian higher education sector emerged in the 1970s under the confines of Israel's occupation. Despite Israel's attempts to restrict and destroy it, generations of students have successfully graduated, and it provides careers for thousands of researchers and educators. But it has been held back by Israel's colonial occupation and control over Palestinian land, movement, and access.

No one can enter the West Bank or Gaza Strip without an Israeli permit. Through this permit system, Israel controls access to Palestinians moving between the West Bank and Gaza (which are not contiguous), as well as anyone wishing to study or teach from other countries outside of Israel and Palestine.

In recent years, Israel has further restricted movement between Gaza and the West Bank, which has harmed specialist institutions and degree programmes.

Israel has made it virtually impossible for non-Palestinians to obtain a visa to teach or study at a Palestinian university. This has cut Palestinian higher education off from the outside world, unable to recruit staff and students. The current crisis will make this much worse.



Al Azhar University, before and after Israeli shelling

Israel's army regularly [invades Palestinian university campuses in the West Bank](#), arrests students and staff, and [causes widespread damage to infrastructure](#). [Between 1 January 2019 and 17 October 2022, Israel arrested 214 Palestinian university students in the West Bank](#). Israel also implements a [severe detention policy against Palestinian students inside the Green Line who hold Israeli citizenship](#).

Gaza's higher education system has deteriorated under Israel's 16-year blockade. University buildings have experienced huge and cumulative structural damage caused by Israel's five wars (including this current one) against Gaza since 2007; this has led to overcrowding and inadequate facilities. Reconstruction and normal campus growth in Gaza has been further hindered by Israel's restrictions on the [import of 'dual-use items'](#) — particularly construction materials — ostensibly to prevent use for military purposes.

The higher education system for Palestinian students and staff was already under severe pressure caused by Israel's colonial occupation policies. The current crisis has brought it to breaking point.

"We urge the international academic community to fulfil its intellectual and academic duty to seek the truth and hold perpetrators of genocide accountable."

A Unified Call for Justice and Freedom in Palestine: A call from Palestinian Higher Education institutions Do not be Silent during Israel's Unfolding Genocide,
[29 November 2023](#)

The international community, international law, and the right to education

[The right to education](#) is enshrined in international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions, which govern the conduct of war and military occupations, protect the right to life, and render many attacks on higher education students or staff unlawful.

As educational facilities, universities are protected under customary International Humanitarian Law — principally [Article 52 of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention](#).

UNESCO Member States are called upon ["to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source."](#)



Israeli military vehicles exiting Birzeit University after a raid - 8 November 2023

Recommendations for parliamentarians

In order to fulfil their legal and ethical duties to the Palestinian people, and Palestinian students and educators in particular, they must urgently:

1. Support calls for an **immediate ceasefire** to prevent further indiscriminate bombardment, the killing of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure, including educational facilities.
2. Call for the illegal **siege on Gaza to be lifted** and ensure unrestricted access to food, water, fuel, electricity and humanitarian aid.
3. Work for the **international protection** of Palestinian civilians, including students and educators, from any further attacks and displacement, ensuring their safe return to their homes.
4. Urge the UK's adoption of and adhere to the [‘Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack’](#) developed by the [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack \(GCPEA\)](#).

[1] This briefing paper uses information provided on the period from 7 October to 5 December 2023 obtained from the State of Palestine's Ministry of Education and Higher Education ([one of which is online](#)), as well as reports from media, UN agencies, and NGOs.



The Islamic University of Gaza after Israeli shelling

1 Gough Square, London, EC4A 3DE
director@fobzu.org | www.fobzu.org
Reg. Charity No. 1114343
Company No. 5713430