

The obliteration of Gaza's multi-civilizational treasures

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Israel's war has brought ruin to thousands of years of rich heritage in Gaza, with Palestinian experts decrying the destruction as a cultural genocide.

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Since the beginning of Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip, innumerable treasures of Palestine's cultural heritage have been damaged or destroyed. Like [so much of the rest](#) of the besieged enclave, these priceless and beloved landmarks of our people's history — archaeological sites, millennia-old religious structures, and museums with ancient collections — now lie in ruin.

Cultural heritage is an essential component of a nation's identity and carries enormous symbolic meaning, as recognized and protected by countless international conventions, treaties, and bodies. Yet [Israel's pounding of Gaza](#), now in its fifth month, displays a callous disregard for these testaments to the thousands of years of Gaza's rich cultural history — to such an extent that it could amount to [cultural genocide](#).

Researchers are trying desperately to catalog these sites and ascertain their current status, but are unable to keep up with the pace of the carnage. And while the loss of human life is the greatest tragedy in any war, Israel's destruction of Gaza's physical cultural heritage achieves much the same goal: the erasure of the Palestinian people. Indeed, many of those interviewed for this article believe this is precisely why these sites are being targeted.

National treasures

Hamdan Taha is a renowned scholar, archeologist, and the former director general of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities in Gaza. In an interview with +972 Magazine after he managed to leave the Strip, he underscored the profound historical and civilizational role played by Palestine in general, and Gaza in particular, despite their small geographic size.

"Gaza has witnessed cultural intermingling where civilizations have intertwined, giving rise to a rich and diverse cultural heritage," he explained. Taha pointed in particular to Gaza's port, which for centuries was a major hub of trade across the Mediterranean and a locus of this multiculturalism.

Gaza's port on January 9, 2020. (Mohammed Zaanoun/Activestills)

"Cultural heritage reflects our national identity," he continued. "It is the witness to the historical

and civilizational epochs our homeland has traversed. It's a national treasure."

According to Taha, the national significance of these sites, and their potential to bring tourism and lift Gaza's economy, "led Israel to intentionally tamper with historical and archaeological buildings, aiming to obliterate the connection between the people of Gaza and their land and history." Israel, Taha added, "wants to disconnect the people of Gaza from the history of the land, while consistently trying to create its own narrative and association with the place."

During the 2014 war on Gaza, Taha and other archaeologists formed a committee to formally assess the damage caused by Israel's attacks. They worked to restore and catalog all of Gaza's antiquities, in part to be prepared for future bombardment. Yet the scale of the current war has overwhelmed their efforts.

Given the continual bombardment of the Strip since October 7, it has been extraordinarily difficult for Taha and other experts to assess the extent of the damage — despite the best efforts of Palestinian and foreign scholars who are monitoring the situation remotely.

The ruins of Qasr al-Basha (Pasha Palace), February 12, 2024. (Omar El Qattaa)

"Most of the information we obtain comes from journalists and individuals who capture scenes either coincidentally or by passing through the location," he explained. "And we rely on information provided by residents living in the vicinity of the targeted areas and on breaking news reports." From these accounts, it appears that Israel's bombing has left little behind.

'It's challenging for experts to keep track while being targeted'

One of the photojournalists documenting this wreckage is Ismail al-Ghoul, who is currently residing in Gaza City and reporting for Al Jazeera. He photographed the ruins of the 1,600-year-old Byzantine Church in the Jabalia district, and the Hammam al-Sammara — a centuries-old bathhouse in the Zeitoun neighborhood.

"The last remaining historical bath in the Gaza Strip, with a history spanning nearly a thousand years, now lies in total ruins," he lamented. "Most people in Gaza have visited this bath and had a beautiful, unforgettable experience. Even visitors to Gaza sought a glimpse of its famous healing and therapeutic properties."

The ruins of Hammam al-Sammara — a centuries-old bathhouse in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, February 12, 2024. (Omar El Qattaa)

Al-Ghoul also photographed the ruins of the 13th-century [Qasr al-Basha](#) (Pasha Palace), which was distinctive for the remarkable preservation of its architectural details. More than 90 percent of the palace was destroyed by Israeli bombing and subsequent bulldozing, leaving only a small portion still standing.

Despite the devotion of photojournalists like al-Ghoul, the war has made it impossible to document the full extent of the damage. "It's challenging for experts to keep track while being in a state of displacement themselves, being targeted, and continually moving from one place to another," Taha explained. "We have lost more than 10 antiquities experts, including four archaeologists."

Among the other heritage sites that are confirmed to have suffered severe damage is the [Great Omari Mosque](#) — the largest and oldest in northern Gaza, with a history which, according to some accounts, dates back 2,500 years. The entire structure has been destroyed, save only for its minaret. The mosque embodied the rich and diverse history of the Strip: originally an ancient pagan temple,

it was later transformed into a Byzantine church, and eventually converted into a mosque during the Islamic conquests.

The Great Omari Mosque, the largest and oldest mosque in northern Gaza. (Omar El Qattaa)

What is left of the Great Omari Mosque, the largest and oldest mosque in northern Gaza, February 12, 2024 (Omar El Qattaa)

Gaza City's Sayyed Hashim Mosque has also been badly damaged. Located in the old town, the mosque housed the tomb of Hashim ibn Abd Manaf — the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, who is so closely identified with the city that it is often referred to in Palestinian literature as "Gaza of Hashim." The Church of Saint Porphyrius, locally referred to as the "Greek Orthodox Church" — which, built in 425 AD, is one of the oldest churches in the world — was damaged too, and one of buildings inside the church's vicinity was completely destroyed.

Taha stressed that the damage has not been confined solely to the north of the Strip. The [Rafah Museum](#) in southern Gaza — the only museum in the area — has been completely destroyed. Al Qarara Museum near Khan Younis, which had a collection of about 3,000 artefacts dating back to the Canaanites, the Bronze Age civilisation that lived in Gaza and across much of the Levant in the second century BC, was badly damaged. The shrine of Al-Khader in the central city of Deir al-Balah, which holds special significance as the first and oldest Christian monastery built in Palestine, was also damaged when an area nearby was bombed.

All over the Strip, Israel has damaged and destroyed secular historical sites as well as those affiliated with Islam and Christianity. Everything is a target.

A mass at the Church of Saint Porphyrius, locally referred to as the "Greek Orthodox Church", in Gaza City. (Omar El Qattaa)<

The damage in the vicinity of the Church of Saint Porphyrius, locally referred to as the "Greek Orthodox Church", February 12, 2024. (Omar El Qattaa)

'All of Gaza's history is on the verge of collapse'

Haneen Al-Amassi, an archaeology researcher and the executive director of the Eyes on Heritage foundation that launched last year, sees the destruction of archaeological sites as part of a broader campaign against Palestinian life.

"Archaeological sites are tangible, physical evidence attesting to the right of Palestinians to the land of Palestine and their historic existence on it, from the Stone Ages to the present day," she told +972. "The destruction of these sites in the Gaza Strip in such a brutal and systematic manner is a desperate attempt by the occupation army to erase the evidence of the Palestinian people's right to their land."

Al-Amassi listed numerous significant losses. The [ancient port of Gaza](#), also known as Anthedon Harbour or Al-Balakhia, which dates back to 800 BC, has been destroyed. Dar al-Saqqa (Al-Saqqa House) in the Shuja'iya neighborhood of eastern Gaza City, built in 1661 and considered the first economic forum in Palestine, was badly damaged too.

Entrance to the Port of Gaza, April 17, 1973. (Nissim Gabai/GPO)

The destruction of these landmarks and archaeological sites, Al-Amassi stressed, represents a significant loss for the Palestinian people — one that will be difficult, if not impossible, to

compensate for. “It is impossible to restore these monuments in the face of continuous bombing,” she said. “And with the shameful silence of international actors, there will only be more bombings of archaeological sites in Gaza. All its history and sanctity is on the verge of collapse.”

Even when they are not the primary target of Israeli bombings, archaeological sites are still being badly damaged. Al-Amassi mourned the Khoudary Museum, also known as Mat’haf al-Funduq (Museum Hotel) in northern Gaza, which housed thousands of unique archaeological pieces, some dating back to the Canaanite and Greek periods; the museum was significantly damaged by the bombing of the adjacent [Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque](#).

Similarly, the Khan of Amir Younis al-Nawruzi, a historic fort built in 1387 in the center of the southern city of Khan Younis, was damaged when the nearby municipality building was bombed. The [Monastery of Saint Hilarion](#) at Tell Umm el-Amr near Deir al-Balah, which dates back more than 1600 years, and Gaza City’s Al-Ghussein House, a historic building dating back to the late Ottoman period, were both also damaged when nearby areas were bombed.

The Khoudary Museum, also known as Mat’haf al-Funduq (Museum Hotel) after the Israeli bombardment of the area, February 12, 2024. (Omar El Qattaa)

The Geneva-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor has [accused](#) Israel of “clear intentional targeting of all historical structures in the Gaza Strip.” Gaza’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities stated similarly in a press release in late December: “The occupation is deliberately committing a massacre against historical and archaeological sites in Gaza City’s old town, assassinating history and the traces of civilizations that have passed through the Gaza Strip for thousands of years.”

Such destruction, whether targeted or not, is a violation of the [1954 Hague Convention](#), which seeks to protect cultural heritage during both peace and war. Al-Amassi hopes the Palestinian Authority will include these violations in its [petition](#) to the International Criminal Court.

A sharp acceleration of longstanding practices

As numerous researchers pointed out, the ongoing destruction in Gaza is of a piece with Israel’s longstanding practices of erasure and appropriation. Eyad Salim, a historian and archaeological researcher from Jerusalem, listed several heritage sites that have been destroyed by Israeli forces since the Nakba of 1948.

“In the Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948, mosques, Islamic shrines, and heritage sites were either closed, destroyed, or converted into synagogues,” he said. “This is a long and extensive issue.”

A damaged church is seen in the depopulated al-Bassa village, in the north. Most of its residents became refugees living in camps in Lebanon. (Ahmad Al-Bazz)

Other examples include [the razing](#) of the Sharaf and Mughrabi neighborhoods of Jerusalem’s Old City in the aftermath of the 1967 War in order to create a plaza in front of the Western Wall, in addition to [many tombs](#) of righteous Muslims. Salim points out that various state bodies — the military, the Antiquities Authority, and the Civil Administration — have all played a role in this destruction and appropriation.

“To implement its plan to build the ‘Jewish state,’ Israel faces identity, geographic, and demographic challenges,” he continued. “So it attributes [Palestinian] cities, villages, urban landmarks, fashion, food, handicrafts, and traditional industries to itself, promoting them in international fora and using

them as part of its Judaizing project.”

Much of this erasure occurs subtly, by simply making it difficult for Palestinian cultural heritage institutions to survive. This is particularly evident in Jerusalem, Salim explained, where the Municipality charges unreasonably high taxes, surveils cultural institutions, arbitrarily demands information, blocks funding, threatens them with closure, and bans any indication of official Palestinian government support for Jerusalem institutions.

The Western Wall and the Mughrabi Quarter, which was destroyed following Israel's capture of Jerusalem's Old City during the 1967 War, taken between 1898 and 1946. (American Colony Photo Department)

What we are currently witnessing in Gaza, however, is a sharp acceleration in Israel's erasure of Palestinian heritage. And the rapid destruction of so many treasured sites during the first weeks of the war quickly became a concern for archaeologists and researchers across the Arab world.

On Nov. 11-12, Egypt hosted the [Arab Archaeologists League's](#) 26th International Conference of Arab Archaeologists, which was centered around solidarity with the people of Gaza.

Representing Palestine was Husam Abu Nasr, a historian from Gaza who happened to be accompanying his mother for medical treatment in Egypt when the war broke out. Abu Nasr presented a report on the museums in the Strip that had been damaged up to that point in the war, and the League established a fund to support the rebuilding and restoration of all heritage sites and institutions, as well as all educational institutions that have been destroyed in Gaza. It also promised to advise on restoration efforts when the war comes to an end.

“Through targeting historical buildings and sites, archaeologists, academics, and researchers, Israel seeks to erase Palestinian identity, and particularly Gazan identity, and make it devoid of history and civilization,” Abu Nasr told +972. “Israel wants to erase our national memory, to promote the distortion of facts, and fight against the Palestinian narrative.” Doing so, he emphasized, is a violation of international and humanitarian law.

A Palestinian woman sits in front of the damaged entrance to Al-Aqsa University in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

Putting Israel's destruction of Gaza's heritage in perspective, Taha emphasized that “human lives are the most important thing, and nothing comes before that. But at the same time, preserving and protecting heritage and culture is an integral component of protecting the people and their spirit.

“Not only the Palestinians in Gaza but humanity as a whole will suffer a great loss if Israel continues to destroy cultural heritage in the Gaza Strip without facing consequences.”

In a statement to +972, the IDF Spokesperson said: “The IDF avoids damage to antiquities and historical sites as much as possible. As documented and presented by the IDF during the war, Hamas' assimilation into and use of the civilian environment are on a large and unprecedented scale.

“Hamas is systematically using public buildings which serve civilian purposes, including government buildings, educational institutions, medical institutions, religious buildings, and heritage sites,” the statement continued. “As part of the destruction of Hamas's military capabilities, there is, among other things, an operational need to destroy or attack structures in which the terrorist organization places a combat infrastructure. This includes structures that Hamas has regularly converted to fighting. The IDF is committed to international law and acts according to it and IDF values.”

P.S.

- +972. February 17, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/the-obliteration-of-gazas-multi-civilizational-treasures/>

Ibtisam Mahdi is a freelance journalist from Gaza specializing in reporting about social issues, especially concerning women and children. She also works with feminist organizations in Gaza on reporting and communications.

- Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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