

The decimation of Gaza's academia is 'impossible to quantify'

Saturday 17 August 2024, by [MAHDI Ibtisam](#) (Date first published: 26 July 2024).

With thousands of faculty and students likely killed and campuses destroyed, Palestinian universities in the Strip are barely surviving Israel's scholasticide.

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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)

Dr. Refaat Alareer was a good friend of mine. A poet, writer, and prominent activist for the Palestinian cause, Refaat taught English literature and poetry for many years at the Islamic University of Gaza. He loved the works of Shakespeare, Thomas White, John Donne, Wilfred Owen, and many others, and he was the editor of two books: "[Gaza Unsilenced](#)" and "[Gaza Writes Back](#)."

Refaat is one of at least 105 Palestinian academics killed in Gaza since the start of Israel's war, according to the Palestinian Education Ministry's [latest statistics](#). His home institution, the Islamic University, has been completely demolished by the bombing campaign — and all of Gaza's 19 universities have sustained severe damage or lie in utter ruins, with over [80 percent](#) of university buildings destroyed. The Strip's nearly 90,000 students who were enrolled in institutions of higher learning before the war have largely been unable to continue their studies.

The annihilation of higher education is particularly tragic for Gaza's future: this source of learning, economic growth, livelihoods, and community is now gone. But the stories of the teachers and schools we have lost, and the educational opportunities that are now foreclosed, deserve to be told.

Refaat understood the importance of education better than most. He encouraged me to learn English for my work as a journalist, and he loved teaching me new words in both English and Arabic. "Through storytelling," he would remind me, "we affirm our right to this land. And learning the English language is a means of breaking free from the prolonged siege of Gaza."

In the Israeli airstrike that took Refaat's life on Dec. 7, his brother Salah and nephew Mohammad, as well as his sister Asmaa and her three children, Alaa, Yahya, and Muhammad, were martyred alongside him, and other family members were wounded. Three of Refaat's sons — one of whom was in his first year at university — and his three daughters stayed with their mother in another shelter and survived.



Refaat Alareer. (Palestinian Information Center)

Refaat's cousin, Muhammad Alareer, said that he believes the Israeli army targeted Refaat precisely because of his scholarship and fluency in English — as well as his work with the "[We Are Not Numbers](#)" project, a Palestinian non-profit that Refaat co-founded in 2015. "Before the attack," Muhammad told +972, "he received many death threats online and via mobile phone from Israeli accounts, demanding him to stop writing and publishing."

According to Muhammad, Refaat received a phone call from someone who identified himself as an Israeli officer, saying that the military knew exactly where he was located, and that he would be assassinated or detained if he continued writing. This threat prompted Refaat to leave his wife and children at the UNRWA school in Al-Tuffah, northeast of Gaza City. He went to his sister's house, thinking it would be safer than the school — but he was sadly mistaken.

'He expected to be targeted'

Among the many Palestinian academics killed in Gaza since Oct. 7 were three university presidents. The 53-year-old physicist Dr. Sofyan Abdel Rahman Taya was serving as the president of the Islamic University of Gaza when he was killed in an Israeli airstrike on Jabalia on Dec. 2 along with his wife, parents, and five children.

+972 spoke to Dr. Taya's brother Nabil, who described how much Sofyan loved his work and cared deeply about his family and those around him. His research on optical waveguides and biosensors won him numerous awards and honors, including the Palestine Islamic Bank Award for Scientific Research, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Award for Young Arab Scientists, and the Islamic University Award for Scientific Research. In March 2023, Dr. Taya was appointed as the UNESCO Chair for Physics, Astrophysics, and Space Sciences in Palestine. As university president, he had a clear goal: to pursue both scientific research and community service, as the cornerstones of the university's mission.



Dr. Sofyan Abdel Rahman Taya. (Courtesy)

But in the weeks before he was killed, Nabil told +972, Sofyan "expected to be targeted, especially after many academic and administrative staff at the Islamic University were assassinated before him." These included Omar Farwana, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, and Dr. Muhammad Shabir,

the former president of the university. After Taya and Shabir, Dr. Said Anwar Alzebeda, of the University College of Applied Sciences in Gaza, was the third university president killed along with several members of his family on Dec. 31.

[Dr. Khitam Al-Wasifi](#), head of the Physics Department at the Islamic University and vice dean of its College of Science, was another prominent Palestinian academic who was killed along with her husband — also a professor at the Islamic University — and children on Dec. 1. Known by colleagues and friends as the “Sheikha of Physicists,” she published dozens of articles on magnetoelectricity and optoelectronics, and was awarded several honors for her work.

Many surviving faculty members saw the deaths of these academics as the deliberate targeting of prominent intellectuals in Gaza — and, as a result, many declined to be interviewed for this article, for fear of being assassinated themselves. By killing influential academic figures, according to Salah Abd El Atei, the president of the International Commission to Support Palestinian Rights (Hashd) who spoke to +972 from Cairo, Israel aims “to destroy everything symbolic in Palestinian society so that the people in Gaza do not have figures they can rely on in the future.”

Campuses in ruin

On Oct. 11, Israel [bombed](#) the Islamic University of Gaza, razing the entire campus. Among the demolished structures was the university mosque, in contravention of international laws prohibiting attacks on places of worship. The university had been damaged in previous wars, but the scale of the current destruction is unprecedented.

View of the destruction at Al-Aqsa University, Gaza City, February 10, 2024 (Omar Elqataa)

U.N. experts have [estimated](#) that 80 percent of schools and universities have been damaged or destroyed since October — amounting, in their view, to “scholasticide.” “It may be reasonable to ask,” the experts wrote, “if there is an intentional effort to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system.”

Al-Azhar University’s main campus in Gaza City and its branch in Al-Mughraqa were laid to waste by repeated Israeli airstrikes in the first few months of the war. Before October, according to Muhammad Al-Wazir, a professor at the university, the university was composed of 12 colleges, collectively offering bachelor’s degrees in 77 majors, 33 master’s programs, and four doctoral programs.

Like the Islamic University, Al-Azhar was repeatedly targeted during previous escalations in Gaza. “Each time,” Al-Wazir told +972, “the university promptly reached out to Arab, Islamic, and international institutions to help repair the damage.” After this war, however, the university will be forced to rebuild from scratch. As Al-Wazir pointed out, the destruction of Al-Azhar University was one of the pieces of evidence [South Africa presented](#) during its argument before the International Court of Justice as evidence of Israel’s systematic and intentional destruction of educational infrastructure.

Israa University, the University of Palestine, Gaza University, Al-Quds Open University, and Al-Aqsa University — my alma mater — have all faced similar wreckage. So many staff members have been killed and virtually all students and employees displaced that a full account of the destruction is extremely challenging. “It is not possible to quantify the damage incurred by the university,” said Dr. Imad Abu Kishek, the president of Al-Quds Open University. “Nor can we determine this situation while we are losing the essential element, the human beings — academics, technicians, workers, and students — on a daily basis.”

Al-Quds Open University, November 25, 2023. (Omar Elqataa)

University infrastructure that benefited the Palestinian public has also been destroyed. Israa University was home to a national museum, licensed by the Tourism and Antiquities Ministry — “the first of its kind on the national level,” as Ahmed Juma’a, a lecturer at the university, explained to +972. “It housed over 3,000 artifacts. The occupation soldiers and officers looted them before blowing up the museum building.” There have also been [multiple reports](#) that Israeli soldiers used Israa University as a makeshift military base and detention center, before [blowing up](#) the remaining buildings in January.

It is not only students and professors who bear the loss of Gaza’s universities, but all Palestinians in Gaza who have been deprived of the benefits of a vibrant academic community — everything from arts and culture to medical care. Esraa Hammad was a dental student at the University of Palestine before October 7. “I studied there for five years and was about to obtain my degree,” she said, “but all of that ended with a decision from the occupation army.”

For Esraa, the most meaningful part of her studies was her work with dental patients in the university’s clinics. “I felt proud of my education and my professors, especially when people would come to thank me for relieving them from tooth pain and helping them return to their normal lives for free.”

‘We insist on continuing students’ education’

Many see the destruction of academic life in Gaza as part of Israel’s aim to ensure that Palestinians have no future in the Strip. According to Abd El Atei, “The army has been seeking to destroy all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip, making it uninhabitable and pushing its residents to migrate to European countries.”

For Dr. Ali Abu Saada, Director General of Higher Education at Gaza’s Education Ministry, the targeting of educational institutions is “part of an effort to strip Palestinians of their essential components of life: thought, culture, and education.” Although university structures may be rebuilt after the war, Abu Saada believes Israel intends to send the message that Palestinians will face a future with “no place for education and no teachers to teach — a reality that helps accelerate migration, which is what the occupier seeks.”

Islamic University of Gaza, Gaza City, February 15, 2024. (Omar Elqataa)

Yet despite the damage, there are still efforts among Palestinians in Gaza to continue teaching and learning. Al-Azhar University has issued a statement calling on students to continue their semesters remotely. Al-Wazir, the Al-Azhar professor, said this “is a way to challenge the reality imposed by the Israeli army’s destruction of universities — so that the academic year does not go to waste for students.”

Dr. Muhammad Hamdan, director of public relations at Al-Aqsa University, confirms that most universities in the Gaza Strip have returned to distance learning, “as a way to insist on continuing students’ education.” At Al-Aqsa, most remote classes focus on more theoretical subjects, for which there are lectures available on the university’s online educational platform. Several lecturers outside of Gaza, Hamdan notes, supervise this platform and hold new remote lectures as necessary.

Distance learning during war, however, cannot happen with consistency. Ayman Safi, a third-year student in Information Technology at Al-Azhar, registered for online classes at his university as soon as they became available. But as he told +972, downloading “academic materials from the platform

to the laptop or mobile phone, including textbooks, requires strong internet,” and he is forced to travel more than four kilometers to find a sufficient connection.

“I try to study during the night,” Safi said, as he prepares for his midterm exams, “because during the day I have many other duties: providing water and firewood [for my family], charging the batteries for our phones and laptops, and lighting a fire to prepare food.” On class days, he wakes up early to attend to his family’s needs, before traveling to access the internet. But when he arrives, he admits, “I have a hard time following the lectures or the information in my textbooks.” Despite this, he is “trying to finish this school year in any way possible.”

The College of Applied Sciences at Al-Azhar University, Gaza City, February 15, 2024. (Omar Elqataa)

Universities in Gaza have made it easier to cross-register between different institutions, which Majd Mahdi, a medical student at the Islamic University of Gaza, has taken advantage of. “I persevered in high school in order to study medicine, which was my dream,” she told +972. After her university was destroyed, she was able to enroll in classes at Cairo University in Egypt and An-Najah University in Nablus.

Universities in the West Bank such as An-Najah, with help from the Education Ministry, have opened their doors to students in Gaza who are able to learn remotely, and [tens of thousands](#) enrolled for the spring and summer semesters. But while their buildings are still standing, these institutions have faced lockdowns and other disruptions since October 7, while the Israeli military and settlers make it increasingly difficult for Palestinians in the West Bank to move freely between their homes and school.

For Mahdi, continuing her education from a tent in [Al-Mawasi](#), west of Khan Younis, has proved nearly impossible. “We don’t have a source of electricity,” she said, “so every time my laptop runs out of battery, I have to go to one of the charging points and it needs a while to charge.” Even when she is able to resume studying, however, “it is difficult to follow all the lectures and [communicate] with lecturers via WhatsApp, since there is no constant internet connection.”

Mahdi hopes that this war will end as soon as possible and that she will return to studying in person, even if it takes place in destroyed classrooms. “We need the help of doctors, so I hope to finish my studies and join the hospital staff so that I can assist my people.”

But the effects of the war will be felt for years to come. According to Dr. Wissam Amer, dean of the Faculty of Communication and Languages at Gaza University, an entire generation of students at all levels of education have faced significant setbacks in their progress. “Rebuilding the education system in Gaza is not impossible,” he said, “but it will take a long time. The universities have been completely destroyed.”

The IDF Spokesperson responded to our request for comment with the following statement: “The IDF does not deliberately target educational institutions as such, but operates solely on military necessity. Hamas systematically places its operatives and military assets in the heart of its civilian population, and conducts its combat from civilian infrastructure, including educational institutions and universities. The Islamic University of Gaza building and its surroundings were used by Hamas for various military activities, above and below ground, this includes a development and production of weapons and the training of the intelligence personnel in the military branch of Hamas.”

Ibtisam Mahdi

P.S.

• +972. July 26, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/gaza-academia-destruction-universities/>

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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