

# MESA Board Joint Statement with CAF regarding the ongoing genocidal violence against the Palestinian people and their cultural heritage in Gaza

MARCH 11, 2024 · LETTERS AND STATEMENTS FROM THE BOARD

☰ Interventions 🌐 Palestine/Israel, US

The Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association and its Committee on Academic Freedom condemn in the strongest possible terms the ongoing attack on Gaza by the state of Israel, which has now claimed more than 100,000 Palestinian dead and wounded according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We have previously written statements on the conflict since 7 October 2023, including the horrors inflicted on civilians and the educational sector in Gaza (21 November 2023, 25 January 2024) the West Bank (22 November 2023), Jerusalem (9 November 2023) and Israel (20 November 2023, 28 November 2023, 23 January 2024). We feel compelled to write once more to address not only the accelerating scale of genocidal violence being inflicted on the Palestinian population of Gaza, but also the concomitant cultural genocide that is the result of the wanton destruction of the built environment and civilian infrastructure of the Gaza Strip.

The horrific human toll of the massive military assault on Gaza, now having surpassed its 155<sup>th</sup> day, has proceeded hand in glove with the deliberate destruction of the historical landscape of the territory. The very notion of a Palestinian people is itself under attack through Israel's policy of destroying Gaza's archaeological, religious, and cultural heritage. As a scholarly community, we are aghast first and foremost at the unfathomable and indiscriminate violence threatening the lives of 2.3 million people. Alongside the magnitude of the atrocities committed against the Palestinian population, we must also bear witness to the decimation of thousands of years of historical material culture that constitute a part of our shared world heritage.

The current multipronged attacks against Gaza appear calculated to achieve nothing less than the total erasure of the Palestinians and their history from this small coastal strip. Horrendous in its nature and scope, this war is also just the most recent, if also most deadly, episode of a hundred-year-long policy, actively abetted and openly supported by the United States, along with a succession of other Western powers, to facilitate the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland, erase their material and cultural claims to it and by extension their historical memory, and indeed deny their existence as a people. In short, Israel is engaging in cultural genocide against the Palestinian people with the active support of its American and European allies.

This support from the United States and the European Union has taken many forms. Perhaps the most devastating example is the record of systematic vetoes cast by the United States against United Nations Security Council resolutions to date calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. In the most recent of the three vetoes

cast by the U.S., on 20 February 2024, the country was alone on the 15-member Council in opposing the call for an immediate ceasefire. The United Kingdom abstained. The United States has also continued to supply weapons to Israel, with President Biden going so far as to invoke extraordinary powers to bypass the usual procedures for such transfers in December 2023. Similarly, European powers have also supplied vital weapons to Israel in the midst of its attacks on Gaza. Even as United Nations experts call for an arms embargo on Israel with some Europeans also calling for a halt in arms exports, the U.S. continues to plan for additional military aid to Israel.

Since the beginning of the current war, estimates of the extent and depth of the destruction are devastating. According to the 9 January 2024 Statement of the Arab Regional Group at the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) “more than 200 of the 325 registered sites in Gaza considered of national or global historic, archaeological, natural, religious and humanitarian importance have been destroyed or severely damaged by the Israeli military.” These sites include, among many others:

- archaeological and cultural heritage sites stretching back 4,000 years, including remains from the myriad empires that conquered and settled Gaza;
- mosques and churches, some among the oldest in the world;
- archives rich with historical documents and municipal records;
- museums large and small filled with holdings from across the centuries and representing both Gaza’s long history and its rich popular culture and traditions;
- community centers, serving as gathering places and venues for art shows, musical events, and poetry readings; and
- libraries, some in mosques and universities, others smaller and local, rich with resources and open to provide books and literacy to all.

Even community graveyards, the most tangible and personal evidence of affective ties to place and heritage have been bulldozed or bombed. A full accounting of the cultural destruction in Gaza can be made only once there is a lasting ceasefire and it becomes possible for international and Palestinian investigators to undertake comprehensive documentation. In the meantime, we provide in the annex to this document what can only be a partial, and most certainly already – given the continuing bombing and shelling – out-of-date list of sites that have been completely or partially destroyed.

These institutions and resources, which underpin the sense of community and shared history and identity of the Palestinians of Gaza (as well as the West Bank and the diaspora), have been and continue to be deliberately destroyed as part of an intentional policy, voiced clearly by multiple Israeli politicians and military figures since early in this conflict, of completely destroying Gaza and precluding any possibility of a meaningful “return” and rebuilding by its forcibly displaced and decimated population.

This deliberate destruction of Gaza’s human and cultural heritage constitutes war crimes and clear breaches of several international conventions including the Fourth Geneva Convention,[1] the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property,[2] the International Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,[3] and the protections of customary international humanitarian law.[4] These war crimes are in addition to the violations of the laws of war and the prohibition on genocide that are the subject of current investigations before the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

The Board of Directors and the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association therefore:

- Condemn the ongoing genocidal violence against the Palestinian people and their cultural heritage and call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire;
- Call for the urgent and durable protection of the Palestinian people, land, and heritage and the immediate provision of all necessary humanitarian supplies together with unfettered access of all relevant international humanitarian agencies to come to the assistance of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip;
- Call on the United States government to desist from any further arms transfers or military assistance to Israel and to support United Nations Security Council resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire and unimpeded humanitarian assistance.
- Call upon the relevant United Nations and other international agencies to send investigative teams and assessment missions to Gaza to work with Gazan specialists to survey and fully document the destruction, and to determine next steps in the process of recovery, reconstruction, and preservation of what remains.
- Call upon the international donor community to urgently and swiftly provide the funds needed to undertake the herculean tasks of documenting the destruction of Palestinian heritage in the Gaza Strip and beginning the rebuilding and rehabilitation of the cultural heritage sites and sector, along with the civilian infrastructure of the territory.

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## ANNEX[5]

This annex represents a compilation as of 1 March 2024 of available documentation concerning Palestinian archives, cultural heritage, libraries, and museums destroyed during the ongoing attack on Gaza by the Israeli military. The destruction is catalogued by category of heritage: libraries, archives, and publishing houses; cultural and social centers; media and artistic production companies; museums; churches; mosques; archaeological sites; cemeteries and monuments; traditional houses and markets; and natural heritage.

### **Public Libraries and Archives**

Gaza Municipal Library  
Central Archives of Gaza City  
Palace of Justice  
Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Center  
Diana Tamari Sabbagh Library

### **University Libraries**

Islamic University of Gaza Library, Gaza City  
Al-Israa University Library and National Museum  
Al-Quds Open University Library, Gaza City

Jawaharlal Nehru Library, Al-Azhar University, Gaza City

### **Publishing Houses and Smaller Libraries**

Al-Shorouq Al-Daem Library and Exhibition  
Sami Mansour Bookshop and Library in Gaza City  
Enaim Library  
Al-Nahda Library  
Lubbud Library  
Al-Nur Cultural Center's library

### **Cultural and Social Centers**

Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center  
Dar Al-Shabab Cultural and Development Authority  
The General Union of Cultural Centers  
The Sununu Foundation for Arts and Culture  
Our Children Society for Development  
Gaza Center for Culture and Arts  
The Hakawi Association for Culture and Arts  
The Palestinian Association for Development and Heritage Protection  
Shababik Professionals  
Village of Arts and Crafts, Gaza Municipality  
Widad Theater and Widad Association for Community Development  
Rafida Suhail Artist Studio  
Es'ad Child Cultural Center  
Bayader Theatre and Arts Association  
Iltiqat Gallery for Contemporary Visual Arts  
Kana'an Educational Development Institute  
Ataa Library, International Board on Books for Young People Children in Crisis Library (Beit Hanoun)  
Yasser Arafat Foundation

### **Media and artistic production companies**

Mashariq Company  
Asayel Studios  
Mix and Match Studio

### **Museums**

Rafah Museum  
Al Qarara Cultural Museum (also known as the Khan Younis Museum)  
Qasr al-Basha (Pasha's Palace Museum, also known as Radwan castle)  
Mathaf al-Funduq (Museum Hotel)  
Al-'Aqqad Cultural Center of Heritage Archaeology and Museum  
Shahwan Museum  
Khudari Museum

Ibrahim Abu Sha'ar Heritage Diwan  
Deir al-Balah museum  
Cultural Karameh Museum

### **Churches**

The Church of Saint Porphyrius  
Ruins of the Monastery of St. Hilarion, part of the Tell Umm Amer site in Nuseirat  
Byzantine Church located in the Jabaliya refugee camp  
Holy Family Church

### **Mosques and other Muslim religious sites**

*At least 114 mosques have been destroyed and 200 others have been damaged in Gaza*

The Grand Omari Mosque  
Othman Bin Qashqar Mosque  
Mosque of Sayyid Hashim  
Sheikh Abdullah Mosque  
Katib al-Wilayah Mosque  
Al-Zafar Dmari Mosque and Center for Manuscripts and Ancient Documents (Shuja'iyya)  
Sheikh Shaaban Mosque  
Mosque of Ibn Othman, Gaza City  
Maqam Khalil Al-Rahman (Abasan)  
Maqam Al-Khidr (Deir al-Balah)  
Maqam al-Nabi Yusuf (Bani Suheila)

### **Archaeological sites**

Tell al-Ajjul  
Tel al-Mansatar (Gaza)  
Tal al-Sakan (Al-Zahra)  
Tell 86 (al-Qarara)  
Tell Rafah (also known as Tell Zara'b)  
Anthedon Harbor  
Roman necropolis (Ard-al-Moharbeen) in northern Gaza  
Qal'at Burquq

### **Cemeteries and Monuments**

*At least 16 cemeteries desecrated during the ground offensive in Gaza*

English Cemetery (Gaza)  
English Cemetery (Zuwaidah)  
Unknown Soldier Monument

### **Historic or traditional houses and markets**

Old City of Gaza City

Al-Suqqa House (Shuja'iyya)

Tirzi House (Rimal)

Hammam al-Sammara (the Sammara Bath)

Al-Fawakhir district

Al-Zawiya market, historical extension of the Al-Qaysariyya market, also destroyed.

Mazan Market (East Khan Younis)

### Natural Heritage

Coastal Wetlands in the Gaza Valley

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[1] Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 sets forth the prohibition on destruction of property by an occupying power: “Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.”

[2] The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), ratified by Palestine and Israel, stipulates in particular that States undertake “to respect cultural property situated within their own territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties by refraining from any use of the property and its immediate surroundings or of the appliances in use for its protection for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the event of armed conflict; and by refraining from any act of hostility, directed against such property.”

[3] Article 6 of the 1972 International Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage states: 1 “the States Parties to this Convention recognize that such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate. 2. The States Parties undertake, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention, to give their help in the identification, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in paragraphs 2 and 4 of Article 11 if the States on whose territory it is situated so request. 3. Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention.”

[4] The International Committee of the Red Cross produced a report on customary rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) applicable in armed conflicts as part of its mandate. Among the rules of customary IHL defined by the ICRC is Rule 38, titled “Attacks on Cultural Property.” The rule states that “party to the conflict must respect cultural property: A. Special care must be taken in military operations to avoid damage to buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education or charitable purposes and historic monuments unless they are military objectives. B. Property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people must not be the object of attack unless imperatively required by military necessity.”

[5] This list was assembled based primarily on lists and information from the following sources:

Statement of the Arab Regional Group at the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on Palestine and the Current War in Gaza, 9 January 2024.

Librarians and Archivists with Palestine, “Israeli Damage to Archives, Libraries and Museums in Gaza October 2023 – January 2024,” 1 February 2024.

Jeremy Diamond, et al, “At least 16 cemeteries in Gaza have been desecrated by Israeli forces, satellite imagery and videos reveal,” CNN, 20 January 2024.

Maha Hussaini, “Israel’s war erases Gaza’s religious and cultural heritage,” Middle East Eye, 12 January 2024.

Indlieb Farazi Saber, “A ‘cultural genocide’: Which of Gaza’s heritage sites have been destroyed?,” Al Jazeera English, 14 January 2024.

Palestinian Ministry of Culture, Gaza, “Second Preliminary Report on the Cultural Sector Damage: War on Gaza Strip October 7<sup>th</sup> – December 6<sup>th</sup> 2023.”

Emmanuel Fabian, “Footage shows IDF demolishing main Hamas courthouse in Gaza,” The Times of Israel, 4 December 2023

Mohammad El Chamaa, “Gazans mourn loss of their libraries: Cultural beacons and communal spaces,” Washington Post, 1 December 2023.

Sarvy Geranpayeh, “Bombing of Gaza has damaged or destroyed more than 100 heritage sites, NGO report reveals,” The Art Newspaper, 28 November 2023.

Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Global museum community responds to Israel-Hamas war,” Museums Association Journal, 6 November 2023.

## Documents & Links

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 [Cultural\\_Genocide\\_MESA\\_Board\\_and\\_CAF\\_Statement\\_with\\_Annex](#)  
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