

Israel Is Systematically Destroying Gaza's Cultural Heritage

Friday 22 March 2024, by [PROCTER Caitlin](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2024).

Over the past five months, Israel has killed at least 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, the vast majority women and children. It has also been deliberately destroying Gaza's rich cultural heritage, from mosques and churches to libraries and children's theaters.

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The mass slaughter and destruction Israel has wrought in Gaza over the last five months suggests a clear intention to make the land entirely uninhabitable for the 2.2 million Palestinians who live there. So far, more than thirty thousand Palestinians have been killed, more than two-thirds of whom are women and children.

All of this has been recorded with astounding courage in videos, images, and text by Palestinian journalists in Gaza. Nobody will be able to look back and say they did not know what was happening.

Faced with this, it is difficult to talk about what else is being destroyed in Gaza. Yet as our screens increasingly fill with images of grey rubble, buildings desiccated by bombardment, and vast areas of land filled with tents in which displaced Palestinians are taking shelter, what is missing from the discussion is any engagement with Gaza's rich historic and contemporary cultural heritage, and the way it is being systematically destroyed.

Cultural Warfare

The destruction of heritage during armed conflict is a widespread phenomenon: think of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Mostar Bridge, the Timbuktu libraries, Palmyra, the Mosul Museum, and the burial ground at Boldyni Hory. In Gaza itself, the [excavation](#) of Anhedon — an ancient city active between 800 BCE and 1100 CE featuring Byzantine construction, built atop Roman remains, sitting above Iron Age artifacts — was reburied at the start of the blockade in 2007 in an effort to protect it from military attack.

The Hague Convention of 1957, signed by 133 countries, aims at ensuring that heritage is not damaged or misappropriated under the circumstances of armed conflict. The recognition of the intentional destruction of cultural property as a war crime is more recent, emphasized in 2016 with the first trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the destruction of [heritage in Timbuktu](#),

and with the 2017 UN Security Council [Resolution 2347](#) that condemns the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage.

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Armed forces often cause considerable collateral, inadvertent, and neglectful damage to cultural sites. Yet heritage, both contemporary and historic, is also a strategic target in conflicts throughout the world, its alteration or erasure forming part of broader strategies.

This could include, for instance, a cultural cleansing campaign to rid a land of its symbols and any reference to statehood, or targeting cultural institutions and heritage explicitly as an expression of domination and a form of punishment to a people. It is certainly a way to acquire wealth, through looting and illegal trafficking of objects, and it is a way to try and break the will of the people.

A Trip to Gaza

Let us imagine a day trip, prior to last October, around some of Gaza's must-see sites. Starting in the north, in Jabalya, you would visit a Byzantine church, first uncovered by archaeologists in Gaza in 1996. The central area has been protected by a stunning piece of architecture, designed with wooden slats to protect the mosaics within it from the sunlight.

Traveling toward the outskirts of Gaza City, just around the corner from al-Shifa Hospital, you could pay a visit to Shababeek, Gaza's first contemporary art gallery and studios. It was established in 2009, following the Israeli attack on Gaza at the turn of the year, by artists Majed Shala, Basel Elmaqosui, and Sherif Serhan. Having moved around several locations, Shababeek found its home in this large building with different exhibition spaces, a floor of painters' studios, and a converted loft for sculptors. It came to be one of the most important artistic spaces throughout Palestine.

Moving toward the oldest part of Gaza City, you would pass through packed streets and busy markets. Many of the buildings are painted, and there are murals and street art everywhere. In the heart of the old town, in the Daraj neighborhood, you would find the great Omari Mosque with its basilica-style architecture and a minaret that dates back fourteen hundred years. It is the oldest and largest mosque in the Gaza Strip and holds decorations from the Mamluk and Ottoman eras. The mosque is renowned for its spectacular columns and inscriptions and covers an area of 4,100 square meters.

In the same neighborhood, you would find the Hammam al-Samara — the only remaining public bathhouse in Gaza. The Hammam features a roof with a dome adorned with round openings decorated with colored glass and an exquisite marble floor. The bathhouse constitutes an important part of the architectural fabric of the old city, alongside the Qaisariah market, known as the Gold Market (for its proliferation of gold shops), which dates from the Mamluk era.

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Not far from here in the Zeitoun neighborhood, you would find the orthodox church of St Porphyrius. It dates back to 407 AD and is thought to be the third-oldest church in the world. It is known for its vibrant blue interior and intricate iconography.

A little further south, in the heart of Nuseirat refugee camp, you could visit a cooperative of women training younger generations in the Palestinian art of *tatreez*, a cross-stich embroidery technique that is more than three thousand years old. In its original form, *tatreez* was inspired by the landscape. The traditional design in Gaza is known for the motif of the cypress tree, often combined with other trees, both upright and upside down. It is an ancient art form steeped in symbolism, and embroidery cooperatives throughout Gaza have become an important source of income generation for women.

Monasteries and Music

Continuing south toward Tell Umm al-Amr close to Deir al-Balah, you would find the St Hilarion Monastery, one of the largest Christian monasteries in the Middle East. The earliest building dates back to the fourth century and is attributed to the father of Palestinian monasticism. It was abandoned after an earthquake in the seventh century and uncovered by archaeologists in 1999.

Professor Ayman Hassouna, who teaches history and archaeology at the Islamic University in Gaza, has worked tirelessly to enable young archaeologists to build their careers working on this excavation. Architecturally it is a very rare site, and one which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has [described](#) as bearing exceptional historical, religious, and cultural testimony.

From here you might also visit the al-Khidr Monastery — part of which was converted into an enchanting children's library in 2016. Run by the NAWA for Culture and Arts Association and its formidable director, Reem Abu Jaber, it has a busy schedule of art and drama activities for children, as well as being packed from floor to ceiling with children's literature.

Traveling to Khan Yunis, you could visit the remains of a castle built in the Mamluk era in the fourteenth century. Only the west facade, the dome of the mosque, and part of the minaret still stand and tower over the rest of the city.

Further south still, you might visit the Rafah Museum, Gaza's museum of Palestinian heritage. After thirty years of planning, it opened its doors at the end of 2022 as a site for promoting, maintaining, and educating young people in Palestinian heritage in Gaza, under the leadership of Professor Suhayla Shahin.

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Taking the coast road back to Gaza City in time to enjoy the spectacular sunset, you could stop off at the al-Sawaf carpet shop to pick up something to take home. The owner, Mahmood al-Sawaf, now in his late seventies, inherited the trade of carpet weaving from his great grandfather hundreds of years ago. As has been widely noted, the English word "gauze" — as in the finely woven medical cloth — comes from the word Ghazza, precisely because Gaza has been known for its skilled weavers for centuries.

Before dinner, you could pass by the music shop of Raji el-Jaru, the founding member of Gaza's most successful rock band, Osprey, as well as being the leading importer of musical instruments to Gaza. Often in the early evening, there would be musicians rehearsing in the upstairs rooms.

Dinner would have to be at one of the Abu Hassira restaurants. A family of fishermen, they have been running restaurants since the 1970s and are renowned throughout Gaza for their *Zibdiyit*, a shrimp and tomato tagine packed with chilli and topped with sesame seeds and dill.

“Hostages All the Time”

The purpose of this imaginary trip is not to romanticize what Palestinians in Gaza have endured through seventeen years of blockade, fifty-six years of military occupation, and — for 1.7 million people in Gaza — seventy-five years of displacement. As one young woman in Gaza told me during a research trip to Gaza in 2018: “We feel like hostages all the time — waiting for someone else to decide what our fate will be.”

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But in this context of systematic oppression and privation, many Palestinians have dedicated their lives to preserving, maintaining, and educating future generations in Gaza's rich historical and contemporary cultural heritage. Since early October, cultural property in Gaza has been under attack, and all of the places described in this day-trip itinerary have been destroyed or severely damaged.

Article 1(a) of the 1954 Hague Convention defines cultural property as:

[M]onuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological

sites; groups of buildings [of] historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above.

Article 1(b) of the convention also refers to those buildings that preserve or exhibit the kinds of property described above, including museums, libraries, and depositories of archives. The provisions of the 1954 Convention are integral parts of international customary law, which means that they are binding on all parties to conflict regardless of whether they are signatories to these instruments.

Recent reports released by the Ministry of Culture in Palestine, the Arab Network of Civil Society to Safeguard Cultural Heritage, and [Heritage for Peace](#) suggest that the scale of damage to cultural sites over the last five months — and to the people who have built and maintained them — is astronomical. Given our limited capacity to know what has happened and where within Gaza, the full picture is almost certainly even worse.

What we do know about includes the bombing of the main public library, which is part of the Gaza City municipality buildings and home to thousands of books. The library was bombed, along with the Central Archives housing key national documents and city records. Many of these documents dated back over a hundred years, detailing municipal work in the city. Subsequent to the bombing, pictures emerged of members of the Israeli military further despoiling books and artifacts in the library.

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A further nine libraries and publishing houses have also been destroyed, including the targeting of Diana Mari Sabagh's library, home to some twenty thousand books and an integral part of the Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Center. The al-Shawa cultural center itself has also gone — founded in 1985, it was the first purpose-built cultural center in Palestine and received a nomination for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1992.

The al-Sununu Foundation for Arts and Culture, home to one of the largest collections of musical instruments in Gaza, has also been destroyed, along with the Gaza Center for Culture and the Arts, renowned for its Red Carpet Film Festival and gallery for visual and performing arts. The Hawaki Association, the preeminent youth theater for young people in Gaza, has been completely destroyed, along with the Widad Theater, Eltiqa contemporary art gallery, and the Rafah Museum.

The old city of Gaza has been utterly devastated, and more than 144 prominent historical monuments have been destroyed. This includes the Omari Mosque, the orthodox Church of St Porphyrius — in which hundreds of Palestinians were [sheltering](#), having been displaced from their homes when it was bombed — and the Byzantine church in Jabaya. The monastery of St Hilarion has been partially destroyed, and the ancient city of Anthedon has been both bombed and bulldozed.

Counting the Cost

The irreparable damage to Gaza's cultural life is also reflected in the killing of so many artists, musicians, and intellectuals. To name only a few: Dr Refaat Alareer, professor of Shakespeare and comparative literature, poet, and writer; poet and novelist Heba Kamal Saleh Abu Nada; photographer and visual historian Marwan Tarazi, killed along with his family in the attack on the Church of St Porphyrius; Tala Balousha, dancer with the Asayel Watan Group; and the writer Abdullah al-Aqad.

A number of renowned artists have been killed, including Heba Zaqout, Halima Abdul Karim al-Kahlout, Tha'er al-Taweel, and Mahmoud Al-Jubairi, as well as the visual artist and theater practitioner Inas Mohammed al-Saqa, who worked extensively in children's theater, and the musicians Omar Faris Abu Shaweesh and Yousef Dawas. The oral historian and pioneer of children's engagement in cultural activities, Iman Khalid Abu Saeed has also been killed, as well as the esteemed calligrapher Mohannad Amin al-Agha.

In addition, at least ninety-four academics have been killed, and every university in Gaza has been bombed. While the majority of academic institutions in the rest of the world continue to ignore what is happening to their peers in Gaza, vital projects have been established to safeguard published and unpublished research and databases, in efforts to limit the loss of knowledge produced in and by Palestinians in Gaza.

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Raphael Lemkin's 1942 definition of genocide, which serves as a basis for international law, includes the disintegration of culture. The preexisting conditions in the Gaza Strip had [already prompted discussions](#) of genocide prior to the current context. Scholars have warned over the years that the siege of Gaza may amount to a "[prelude to genocide](#)" or a "[slow-motion genocide](#)." The prevalence of racist, dehumanizing language and hate speech in Israeli social media was also noted in a [warning](#) issued in July 2014 by the UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide and special adviser on the responsibility to protect.

The idea of eradicating culture in Gaza is part of a long-standing pattern of cultural destruction throughout historic Palestine, feeding the logic of settler colonialism to eliminate every aspect of a people and their identity from the land. The vandalizing of Palestinian institutions and destruction of Palestinian cultural property in 1948 left Palestine in a state of what scholars such as Daud Abdulla have called "cultural bareness."

Later, in 1967, after the occupation of East Jerusalem, scores of archaeological artifacts were removed from the Palestine Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem and sent to the Israel Museum in West Jerusalem. In 2002, when the construction of the separation wall began, an estimated eleven hundred Palestinian landmarks and archaeological sites were ruined by the construction of the wall, while hundreds of other Palestinian sites were cut off entirely and annexed to Israel.

Under international law, excavations by the occupier in occupied land are strictly forbidden. In recent years, several resolutions have been passed by the UN Security Council and UNESCO calling on Israel to end its excavations and damage to historical Palestinian sites, but Israel has refused to comply.

Deliberate Destruction

To date, the Genocide Convention has failed to prevent the destruction of tangible and intangible Palestinian cultural heritage, which by Lemkin's definition and those of the UN Secretariat and the Ad Hoc Committee on Genocide amounts to cultural genocide. Since October 2023, little has been done to protect Gaza's historic or living heritage.

The destruction of many of the sites mentioned here featured in South Africa's case against Israel for the crime of genocide at the International Court of Justice.

The few statements that have been issued by UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) use passive language and fail to articulate the role of the Israeli state in the destruction of heritage. Leading archaeologists like Mahmoud Hawari [have highlighted](#) the notable difference between these statements and the strong condemnation of destruction of cultural heritage the same organizations issued in relation to Ukraine.

Many who do not know better have asked if there even *was* any culture or heritage in Gaza to begin with. This is why in recent years I have been working with fellow academics and heritage experts in Gaza to write *The Gaza Guidebook*, as a comprehensive documentation of Gaza's many cultural sites. Most of these sites have been damaged or destroyed in the last five months. We have lost contact with three of the five authors in Gaza and do not know if they have been detained, displaced, buried under the rubble, or otherwise killed.

The destruction of many of the sites mentioned here featured in South Africa's case against Israel for the crime of genocide at the International Court of Justice. The destruction of ideas, creativity, and heritage in Gaza, in this landscape already harrowed by siege and occupation, cannot be depicted as collateral damage in a supposed war against Hamas. Alongside the horror of mass killing, it is vital not to ignore this deliberate destruction of the cultural life that makes Gaza such a rich tatrez of intellect, beauty, and hope.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 03.13.2024:

<https://jacobin.com/2024/03/israel-gaza-war-cultural-heritage>

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