

ARMED CONFLICTS

Gaza: Israel deliberately militarizes civilian objects, turns schools into military bases



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Palestinian Territory - As part of its genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, ongoing for the seventh month now, the Israeli army has militarized civilian objects, including schools and educational facilities. Israel's turning of these facilities into military bases is in flagrant violation of international law and the rules of war.

The Israeli army was not satisfied with its systematic and widespread bombing and massive destruction of schools, committing of serious crimes against civilians who were sheltering inside them, and deliberate targeting of these vulnerable people with air and ground military operations, killings, and direct unlawful executions. Instead, it converted a number of schools into military bases, gathering places for its forces and vehicles, detention and interrogation centres, and torture facilities. This is in violation of both international humanitarian law, which was established to protect civilian objects from the danger of military operations, and the obligations placed on Israel as an occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which require taking the necessary measures to ensure that children who are orphaned or separated from their families as a result of a war are able to exercise their right to education.

During its field invasion of most of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army converted a number of schools into military bases and detention facilities. One such facility was the Salah al-Din Preparatory School in Gaza City, which in February was used as a detention and interrogation centre for hundreds of locals.

Israeli journalist Amir Bohbut released a video clip on 30 April in which he documents an Israeli military base located inside a Gaza Strip school, which Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor reiterates is a war crime. In the video, he states, "We are in a forward operations base belonging to the 162nd Division in the heart of the Gaza Strip. The video proceeds to display several large containers set up in the centre of the schoolyard, which he says are being used as offices and bedrooms. Bohbut adds: "Raids, ambushes, and other operations will start from here."

A different video shows Israeli soldiers from the Civati battalion filming themselves inside a school while wearing military gear and carrying weapons; the Israeli and battalion flags are flying proudly behind them. Additionally, members of the Israeli military have published videos of sniper soldiers firing from inside schools, some of which are United Nations-run schools.

Numerous footage clips have also been released that show Israeli soldiers seizing control of schools after forcibly evacuating displaced individuals who were seeking shelter there, inflicting thousands of injuries and making thousands of arrests. One such video shows an Israeli soldier recording a message to his mother on a school blackboard in Gaza, written in both Hebrew and Ukrainian. Soldiers have even shared videos of themselves inside classrooms on social media, even going so far as to publicly boast about bombing a UN-run school.

In its genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, ongoing since 7 October 2023, Israel has destroyed or partially destroyed 80% of the Strip's schools. In a joint statement released on 18 April 2024, United Nations experts described this as "edu-genocide", i.e. the deprivation of yet another generation of Palestinians of their educational future.

Even the UNRWA-run schools, which have served as shelters for hundreds of thousands of civilians who were forcibly displaced, have been the target of intense Israeli attacks, some of which have occurred repeatedly and continually. These attacks have also occurred in areas that the Israeli army has designated as "safe".

The Israeli army has been ordering the illegal evacuation of roughly 246 square kilometres, or roughly 67% of the Gaza Strip's total area, since 7 October. This covers every area north of the Gaza Valley, whose residents were told to leave in late October, as well as certain areas south of the Gaza Valley that have been under constant evacuation orders from the Israeli army since 1 December 2023.

Israel's genocide in the Gaza Strip killed over 6,500 students, 756 teachers, and caused thousands more injuries between October 2023 and mid-April 2024. The death toll is expected to rise daily, and over 625,000 students have been denied their right to education over the course of an entire academic year. Additionally, six universities have been demolished, including Al-Israa University, which Israel bombed after first utilising it as a military base for 70 days.

The head of the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Ajith Sunghay, previously declared that the educational system in Gaza "no longer exists at this stage", citing the destruction of schools by Israeli bombing operations as well as their use by displaced Palestinians as shelters. "Children can no longer find a place to learn."

In a report published on 13 December 2023, Euro-Med revealed that the Israeli army has turned schools sheltering 10s of thousands of displaced

people into military centres and field execution sites as part of its genocide against Palestinians.

Euro-Med Monitor received testimonies at the time about Israeli army forces carrying out unjustified field executions and killings of Palestinian civilians after detaining them for days inside the same schools where they had sought refuge from Israeli violence.

The testimonies revealed horrific human rights violations and atrocities against civilians killed after their release. The timing of the killings indicates that there was no reason to shoot them, other than to satisfy the bloody desires of Israeli soldiers or express the comprehensive moral permissibility—in the eyes of Israel's military—when it comes to slaughtering and humiliating Palestinian civilians.

Around 15 dead Palestinians' decomposed bodies were recently found in Al-Falujah neighbourhood, west of the Jabalia refugee camp. Based upon its initial investigation, Euro-Med Monitor confirms that these individuals were subjected to field executions after being questioned by members of the Israeli army at the Shadia Abu Ghazaleh government school.

Roughly one hundred leading European academics condemned Israel's genocide against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip in an open letter in March, citing its physical and cultural liquidation of the Palestinian people and systematic destruction of the Strip's educational system.

It is crucial to shield schools in the Gaza Strip from Israel's military assaults. The international community must put pressure on Israel to cease its military operations against and inside schools in the Strip, in order to guarantee Palestinian children's right to education and to ensure that they return to their classrooms as soon as possible, especially given that these schools will require extensive repairs and reconstruction.

Converting educational buildings into military bases is a practice that continues the colonial legacy of dominance and tearing apart the fundamental components of peoples, particularly their cultural and educational heritage.

The humanitarian community needs to be aware of the terrible conditions that children in the Gaza Strip are living in. Children are among the most vulnerable populations during times of armed conflict, and the ongoing Israeli military assault on the Strip is making their suffering worse. They are no longer protected in any way by international law, and the Israeli army has turned them into direct and intentional targets of murders, executions, and deliberate and indiscriminate targeting. They have also been subjected to crimes such as starvation, siege, denial of health care and basic necessities for survival, and prolonged denial of education, which will negatively impact their ability to exercise their other rights and leave them vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, and exploitation. Finally, there is a risk that future generations will not have the knowledge necessary to rebuild Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip after the Israeli military attack is over.

It is important to allow investigative committees and specialized technical committees to visit the Gaza Strip in order to look into the horrifying crimes Israel has committed and to hold it responsible for its repeated violations of the International Convention to Prevent and Punish the Crime of Genocide. These violations include the systematic persecution of Gaza Strip residents due to their Palestinian heritage, including killing and abusing them physically and psychologically, undermining their ability to survive, and forcing them to flee their homes by crushing and militarizing civilian property.



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