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Destruction of higher education (educide) in the Gaza Strip: Assessment and support mechanisms

By:

Dr. Ibrahim Rabaia

Dr. Lourdes Habash

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1. Introduction

The higher education sector in the Gaza Strip has been systematically targeted for decades, suffering damage to both infrastructure and human capital. Yet, the destruction caused has reached unprecedented proportions since October 7th, in a context where Israeli strategy is shifting from one of de-development¹ to one of educide², a concept that emphasizes the link between the damage caused to the education system and the unfolding genocide in the Gaza Strip³.

This paper monitors the material and human losses to the infrastructure of the higher education sector, ranging from partial to severe damage or total destruction of university campuses, colleges, higher education institutions, and university faculties. As the aggression and destruction continue and the situation on the ground evolves, it is challenging to provide a comprehensive assessment of the war's impact on the lives of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in general, and its education sector in particular. However, we believe it is crucial to present an informed overview to serve as a foundation for reflecting on the actions necessary to quickly assist and restore the higher education sector.

This research was conducted during the preparations for the new academic year in Palestine, which raised timely and sensitive challenges for the higher education sector in Gaza. Several initiatives have started to work on this sector over the last few months, but as the new academic year kicks off, it is still marked by a lack of clear evaluation and assessment of human, infrastructural, and logistical capacities. Thus, this paper contributes to such an effort by mapping the current landscape of the educational sector

¹ According to Sarah Roy, de-development, in economic context, distorts the development process and threatens to undermine it entirely (see: Sarah Roy, (1999). "De-development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society Since Oslo". *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28(3), 64–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538308>). In Higher education sector, the de-development policies concentrated around de-mobility, advancing the financial dilemmas, and selective military targeting. (See: Ibrahim Rabaia and Lourdes Habash, . "The Hidden War on Higher Education: Unmasking the 'Educide' in Gaza". *POMEPS Studies* 51. April, 2024. <https://pomeps.org/the-hidden-war-on-higher-education-unmasking-the-educide-in-gaza>).

² Not many researchers have used the concept "educide" before, with the notable exception of Rula Alousi, who "recognizes the destructive impact on educational infrastructure as a form of genocide [...] Historically, and as literature was reviewed, educide has been used to insinuate the link between genocide and the damage to the education system". Rula Alousi (2022). "Educide: The Genocide of Education. A case study on the impact of invasion, and conflict on education". *The business and management review*, volume 13 (2).

³ The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) is an instrument of international law that codified for the first time (9 December 1948) the crime of genocide. According to article II of the Convention, genocide means acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has repeatedly stated that "the Convention embodies principles that are part of general customary international law. This means that whether or not States have ratified the Genocide Convention, they are all bound as a matter of law by the principle that genocide is a crime prohibited under international law". <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

in Gaza. It details national, regional and international attempts to bring relief to this sector, attempts to provide a needs assessment, and introduces the grounds for developing discussions around higher education in Gaza by providing a map of existing efforts.

The paper offers an early assessment of the material and human losses in the higher education sector in Gaza, drawn through qualitative and quantitative data collected through field-based monitoring. The paper maps the existing interventions and follows the technical and field challenges encountered in implementation. Finally, the paper concludes with suggested interventions. Importantly, it presents the crisis affecting human resources, as the war has led to the interruption of salaries and sources of livelihood for employees of most universities, either partially or completely. It has also led to the retrenchment of staff in several universities permanently or temporarily.

We undertook data collection through fieldwork that took place in Gaza between April and June 2024, with the help of our assistant researchers. We also conducted interviews with 18 individuals, including academics in current or previous decision-making positions in their institutions. Twelve academics refused to participate in interviews; this was mainly because of security concerns, but also due to limited communication tools. We also interviewed a representative of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The data collection process faced three major challenges: the changing situation in terms of damage and losses, as the war continued to unfold; the fragmentation of initiatives, which made it difficult to capture these comprehensively; and the concerns of interviewees for their safety and future career prospects in the face of such an uncertain situation, which made it difficult to obtain full, informative interviews – most could be described as conservative in their responses.

2. Monitoring the attacks and damage caused to the Higher Education system in the Gaza Strip

2.1. The Higher Education Sector in Gaza before October 7th

The Palestinian higher education sector in the Gaza Strip experienced growth after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority. In 1994, there were seven institutions of higher education in the Strip, including four institutes and three universities. By 2017, the number expanded to reach 28 institutions, comprising eight universities and 20 colleges.⁴ According to the Palestinian Ministry of Education and

⁴ These numbers include branches of universities in the West Bank located in the Gaza Strip, and branches of universities inside the Gaza Strip, such as Al-Quds Open University, as well as some faculties affiliated to universities in Gaza. The figures of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education indicate that there are

Higher Education, the number of students in Gaza universities in 2017 reached 87,000, with 80% enrolled in universities and 20% in colleges.⁵

Since 2008, the higher education sector in Gaza has, however, suffered from processes of de-development, as its institutions came to be repeatedly targeted for attack by Israel during previous wars. In the 2014 war, the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) estimated losses in the higher education sector at about 10 million dollars. The losses and damages were concentrated in Al-Azhar University, where three buildings were destroyed, and the Islamic University, where two buildings were destroyed, along with the destruction of scientific laboratories in several other universities.⁶ During 17 years of blockade punctuated by several wars, the higher education sector has suffered from numerous problems that have hindered its development and resulted in its impoverishment. These include restrictions on movements and on the importation of educational equipment (books, science laboratory and other educational equipment),⁷ complex financial crises, obstacles to the development of infrastructure, and the destruction and targeting of facilities and individuals.

2.2. Material Losses of Universities and Colleges in Gaza Strip during the Current War

The current war on Gaza has led to the vast, comprehensive and systematic destruction of the higher education sector. This includes targeting students and personnel, and destroying key infrastructure, rendering it inoperable. Some institutions have, moreover, turned into shelters.

The following data related to major material losses has been gathered from field-based monitoring by field researchers, and has been double verified through comparison with information from official sources. This data was collected from May 7th 2024, and was continually updated from several open sources until June 20th 2024.

The monitoring process adopted three levels of categorization:

- **Complete**, referring to a situation of total destruction in which no university building remains.
- **Severe damage**, where some destroyed buildings or floors remain, but cannot be used for purposes of study or academic work.

nineteen education institutions in the Gaza Strip, with branches and faculties affiliated to their original centers.

⁵ Rabaia, I and Habash, L. op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For more, See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2011/03/16/blockade-frustrates-gaza-students>.

- **Partial**, where some floors and buildings have been damaged, and others have been bombed, but there remains the possibility to repair and restore what is left of these buildings.

The study relied on monitoring the infrastructure of universities and colleges in the northern governorates, regardless of their location on the ground:

- Field visits to the Gaza and North Gaza Governorate, conducted by the youth activist, Amin Abed.
- Field visits to Khan Yunis Governorate and Rafah Governorate, conducted by the youth activist, Sari Qa'ud.

Interviews with academics holding administrative positions in different universities in the Gaza Strip, conducted by the assistant researcher, Yahia Qa'ud. Interviews are attached in the Appendix.

University		Type of Education	Amount of Damage	Nature of Losses
1	Al-Azhar University - Gaza	University's main campus - Gaza Faculty of Intermediate Studies - Al-Azhar University The campus also includes the Faculty of Intermediate Studies and buildings of the scientific faculties.	Severe damage	Severe damage caused to the buildings on October 11, 2023.
		Faculty of Medicine "Haidar Abdel-Shafi" - Tel al-Hawa	Partial	Severe damage to the building of the Medicine faculty
		Al-Azhar University branch, in al-Mughraqa, which has two buildings. The first is composed of 3 faculties: Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Faculty of Sharia, Faculty of Education. The second is the Building of King Hassan II. It includes	Complete	The university branch in al-Mughraqa area has been completely blown up, and was subsequently turned into an Israeli military base - the former settlement of Netzarim.

		Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine and Faculty of Law. This branch has 6 laboratories and the University's radio and television station.		
		Beit Hanoun Farm - Faculty of Agriculture	Complete	The University farm, in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip, has been completely destroyed.
2	Islamic University of Gaza	University's main campus - Gaza	Complete	The Islamic University was bombed on October 11, 2023. The Israeli army broadcast live videos showing the complete destruction of the University.
		Faculty of Medicine and the University Hospital - Al-Mughraqa	Complete	The University branch in al-Mughraqa was completely blown up, and was turned into an Israeli military base - the former settlement of Netzarim.
		The University's branch - Khan Yunis Governorate	Severe damage	The first building was bombed and completely destroyed. The second was raided by the Israeli army, and its contents were vandalized.
3	Al-Aqsa University	University's main campus - Gaza	Severe damage	The building was destroyed.
		The University's branch - Khan Yunis	Severe damage	Severe damage
4	Israa University	University's main Campus - Al-Zahraa city	Complete	The University in al-Zahraa city was completely blown up, and it was turned into a military base - the former settlement of Netzarim.
		Israa Medical City (under construction) - Al-Zahraa city	Complete	The Israa Medical City, which was still under construction, was completely destroyed and turned into a military base - the former settlement of Netzarim.

		The University's branch in Gaza city - Jaffa Street.	Complete	This branch serves Gaza and its north.
		The Radio Building in Gaza city - Israa Radio	Complete	The University Radio in Tel al-Hawa
5	University of Palestine	Main campus - Al-Zahraa city	Complete	The University in al-Zahraa city was blown up completely and turned into a military base - the former settlement of Netzarim.
		The University's branch in the south - Khan Yunis	Complete	
6	Gaza University	Main campus - Al-Zaytoun neighborhood	Complete	
		The University's branch - North Gaza	Complete	The University branch in Beit Lahia was bombarded, raided and completely destroyed.
		The University's branch - Khan Yunis	Complete	The campus in Khan Yunis was bombed and raided by the Israeli army.
7	Al-Quds Open University	Open learning "administration"		
		The University's branch in Gaza governorate	Severe damage	Military raid with tanks, causing severe damage to the University branch in Gaza
		North Gaza	Complete	Bombing and raiding the University campus in North Gaza
		Khan Yunis	Severe damage	The branch has been bombed yet, displaced people sheltering there were subjected to violence and expulsion. Thousands of displaced people returned to it after the Israeli army withdrew from the governorate.
		Rafah	-	The branch has not been bombed yet. Thousands of displaced people are sheltering there.

		Middle Area	-	The branch has not been bombed yet. Thousands of displaced people are sheltering there.
8	University College of Applied Sciences	Main campus in Gaza City	Severe damage	The University College was severely damaged due to direct bombardment in Tel al-Hawa neighborhood.
		Branch in Khan Yunis	-	The branch was turned into a shelter for thousands of displaced people, under Egyptian supervision.
9	Palestine College of Nursing - Khan Yunis	University college	-	The College has not been destroyed yet, as it is adjacent to the European Hospital, and that area has not yet been invaded.
10	Palestine Technical College - Deir al-Balah	University college	-	The College has not been bombed nor raided yet. It is currently sheltering thousands of displaced people.
11	University College of Ability Development	University college	-	The College of Ability Development, affiliated to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, was under siege during the invasion of Khan Yunis, with all the displaced people and the PRCS crews sheltering within.
12	Arab College of Applied Sciences	Main campus - Rafah	-	Thousands of displaced people are sheltering in the main campus.
		Branch in the North	Complete	The building in North Gaza was burned down and destroyed.
		Khan Yunis branch	Partial	The campus was partially damaged and the branch director was killed during the invasion of Khan Yunis governorate. Nevertheless, the branch is sheltering thousands of displaced people.
13	Gaza Community	Community College	Partial	A small college in Tel al-Hawa neighborhood. It was not

	College for Tourism Studies			subjected to direct damage. However, it was partially destroyed when the neighborhood was bombed.
14	Gaza Community Training College	First branch - community college in Gaza	Partial	The branch was not directly bombed. However, the area in which the college is located, "The Universities Square", was bombed. The branch was partially damaged due to bombing of the Islamic University nearby.
		Second branch - Khan Yunis	Partial	UNRWA's Khan Yunis Training College (Industrial) was bombed and was under siege for over a week as it was sheltering thousands of displaced people. Many of them have lost their lives.
15	Al-Quds University - Abu Dis	Gaza branch	Partial	The branch was not directly bombed. However, the area where the campus is located was destroyed. This campus is dedicated only to postgraduates
16	Birzeit University	A branch of the Media Development Center - Gaza	Severe damage	The building was targeted during the invasion of the Gaza governorate. The branch does not provide academic education but offers extracurricular activities in the Gaza Strip for media students.

The data presented above was gathered by the field research team in Gaza Strip. The data has been double-checked by comparing with the data of Ministry of Education and Higher Education. A report by the Ministry, which has monitored the Israeli Occupation's violations against education, states:

19 higher education institutions have been subjected to severe damage in Gaza Strip. More than 33 buildings were completely destroyed, while 55 buildings were partially damaged.⁸

⁸ Israeli violations against the Palestinian higher education sector 01/01/2024 – 16/05/2024. Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

2.3. Human Losses to Universities and Colleges in Gaza Strip during the War⁹

The Israeli attacks killed three presidents of universities, 17 full professors, and 59 PhD holders. Among these was Prof. Sufian Abu Tayeh, the President of the Islamic University, who was targeted with his family by an airstrike. Abu Tayeh was one of the most prominent scientists of physics and applied mathematics in Gaza. The same university lost the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Omar Farwaneh, along with the Dean of the Faculty of Nursing, Naser Abu Nour.¹⁰ Such systematic and planned targeting seems aimed at eliminating human capital in the higher education sector and provoking brain drain from Gaza. The following table details the human losses in the higher education sector of Gaza:

Category ¹¹	Martyrs	Injured	Prisoned
Staff	105	More than 1,115	Unknown
Students	More than 579	More than 1,189	Unknown
	Uncertainty about the future and deprivation of education.	88,000 students are deprived of the opportunity of attending their universities. They have lost the academic year of 2023/2024.	

3. Assessing the future challenges for Higher Education in the Gaza Strip

Several issues have been revealed through field-based monitoring of the universities, at the institutional level and at the level of displaced peoples (including families, students and academics) who have been sheltering in the universities' headquarters and buildings in the Southern Gaza Strip.

3.1. The Occupation is Restructuring the Higher Education Sector

Higher education institutions in the Gaza Strip have been systematically targeted. Universities and colleges have been bombed with the aim of completely taking some of

<https://www.mohe.pna.ps/Portals/0/uploads/ViolationsReport.pdf?ver=KHCQcjKn83FfCg1gcS84nw%3d%3d>
⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hani Zaqout. Assassinated prominent academics ... how Israel launched systematic war on Gaza universities? TRT. 22 March 2024. <https://2u.pw/POC5EMkG>

¹¹ Ibid.

them out of service for political reasons, and geographically displacing others by entirely demolishing them and preventing their future reconstruction in the same locations – if, for instance, Israel achieves its plan of a permanent occupation in Netzarim. Statements of the Israeli war government have made clear the deliberate and systematic nature of the campaign of bombardments, declaring that the main goal is to prevent the presence of life and the provision of services in the Gaza Strip.

Most branches of universities in the northern Gaza Strip, such as Al-Quds Open University branch, Al-Zaytouna College, Gaza University, and the Arab College, are located in the center of the northern governorate – specifically in the city of Beit Lahia, in Sheikh Zayed Street and its surroundings. A branch of the Ministry of Education is also present in the north. All these facilities have been bombed and then invaded by ground forces. The campus of the Arab College of Applied Sciences, according to the briefing of the Academic Vice-President of the northern Gaza branch, Abdullah Abu al-Hinud, was burned down and destroyed.¹² As for Gaza University, the buildings of its branches in Gaza City, Al-Zahraa and Khan Yunis were destroyed, according to the University's Director of Public Relations, Ramy Odeh. This is in addition to the destruction of all its laboratories and classrooms, which will limit the University's ability to accommodate students and carry out the educational process when (or if) the genocidal war ends.¹³ Similar levels of destruction were faced by other universities and colleges, but what happened to the higher education institutions of the North coincided with the displacement of hundreds of thousands from the North to Gaza's southern regions?

The campaign of destruction wrought against the higher education in the North cannot be understood in isolation from these processes of massive displacement and depopulation, the disruption of society and its institutions and structures. The reduction of the population in the northern Gaza Strip and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people together signal deep and influential social transformations which will prevent recovery. By November 2023, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics,¹⁴ at least 400,000 citizens have been displaced from the North; this number is not yet fixed and depends on the future course of military operations.

This destruction mechanism has been also used in the governorates of Gaza and Khan Yunis. Universities in the Gaza governorate were bombed. When the Occupation forces began their ground incursions, they continued destroying universities, especially their main campuses, such as those of al-Azhar University and the Islamic University, and their branches in al-Zahraa and Mughraqa. Moreover, the Israa University and

¹² Personal interview, Academic Vice President of the Arab College Branch, Abdullah Abu Al-Hinud, Sunday, April 14, 2024

¹³ Personal interview, The Director of Public Relations of Gaza University, Rami Odeh, Monday, April 15, 2024.

¹⁴ Palestinian Bureau of Statistics reveals the number of individuals who are staying in Gaza and its north. Alhurra. 17 of November 2023. <https://2u.pw/PaypMfVV>.

University of Palestine were turned into military settlements that split the Strip. The occupation of the two universities located in the region where the Netzarim Settlement stood before the Israeli withdrawal in 2005 raises concerns about the intentions of the Israeli authorities hold this seized territory permanently. The ground invasion of Khan Yunis governorate brought only further disaster for the displaced people escaping from the northern governorates who had sought temporary shelter in the universities and colleges of the governorate.

As for the economic losses, al-Azhar University in Gaza launched a distress call on 22 April 2024, requesting assistance and announcing that its financial losses stood at an estimated \$121 million. These losses may equal or surpass those of the Islamic University, followed by the losses incurred by the Al-Aqsa University. These three universities are the largest in the Gaza Strip, with the greatest numbers of academics and students.¹⁵

3.2. Challenges in Education Monitoring and relieving

Notwithstanding the statistics issued and the data derived from field-based monitoring, it remains difficult to accurately determine the extent of losses amid constant bombardment and incursions in the Gaza Strip. What is currently being recorded is that which occurs in places that are accessible, and with casualties who have been identified. However, there are many victims, both academics and students, who are still under the rubble, or have been imprisoned, kidnapped or wounded and have not yet been registered in the records of either the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

The monitoring process is made only more difficult by the fact that it remains impossible to hire a monitoring team amid the ongoing war and pervasive insecurity. University campuses in several locations cannot be accessed in this context, especially those located in the military operation centers, such as the Netzarim axis.

¹⁵ The three universities in Gaza together comprise more than 70% of higher education students in Gaza Strip. This can be clarified as follows:

The Islamic University: The Islamic University in Gaza offers 161 academic programs for doctoral, master's, bachelor's, higher diploma, and specialized professional diploma levels. The University has eleven faculties with 20,000 enrolled students.

Al-Azhar University in Gaza: Al-Azhar University offers 3 doctoral programs, 26 master's programs, and 76 bachelor's programs. The University has around 600 academic and administrative staff members, and 15,499 enrolled students.

Al-Aqsa University: Al-Aqsa University offers 72 academic programs and has around 459 academic staff members and 16,747 students.

For more, see:

- The Islamic University channel on Telegram.
- Al-Azhar University website: <https://www.alazhar.edu.ps/arabic/index.asp>
- Al-Aqsa University website: <https://alqsa.edu.ps/ar/home/>

Interviews gathered in the course of compiling this report reflected complicated life conditions for academics and students in the displacement camps and locations. Some academics tried to launch academic activities for some students, such as thesis defense.¹⁶ However, some academics were forced to relocate over five times, while others left the Gaza Strip for Egypt or other destinations.

3.3. Academics Losing their Livelihoods

In addition to human losses in the educational system, academics in the Gaza Strip suffer from other types of losses. Many universities in the Gaza Strip rely on academics to teach on an hourly basis, which means that their income is based on the courses they teach per semester. Usually, academics sign semester contracts at the end of each semester, after submitting grades for the courses they teach. These academics have been left unemployed since the onset of the war, and universities have given no official commitment to include them in post-war recovery plans.¹⁷

According to the Director of Public Relations at Gaza University, Rami Aouda, there are many private universities and colleges in the Strip that rely on tuition fees to pay salaries. Since the educational process has been disrupted, these universities and colleges have not been able to pay their employees. This led the University Council of Gaza University to request that academics and employees go on unpaid leaves until further notice.¹⁸

Both Hassan Ahmad and Marwan al-Agha¹⁹ have clarified that the educational system in the Gaza Strip has suffered significant material losses in buildings and facilities, along with human losses among academics. Al-Agha says: “Without an integrated effort, we will not be able to overcome the crisis, especially with some universities in Gaza depend[ent] on limited and uncertain resources, such as tuition fees, to pay salaries. This leaves experienced academics without a source of income, which makes it essential for the Palestinian Authority and the relevant ministries to put effort to secure salaries for academics, as they are the main asset in rebuilding the education system in the Gaza Strip”.²⁰

¹⁶ For instance; Saleh Al-Ayadi from Al-Azhar University defense was in Rafah camps and through Zoom. See: <https://n9.cl/zrj8p6>

¹⁷ Yahia Qa'ud, former lecturer on an hourly basis in the Faculty of Intermediate Studies in al-Azhar University.

¹⁸ Personal interview, Director of the Public Relations Department at Gaza University, Rami Odeh, Saturday, April 13, 2024.

¹⁹ Personal Interview, Associate Professor of Business administration, the Former VP of Administrative affairs of Al-Azhar University, Marwan Agha, 17 April, 2024.

²⁰ - Personal interview, Vice President of the University of Palestine for Public Relations and Media Affairs, and Advisor to the Chairman of the University's Board of Directors, Hassan Ahmed, Wednesday, April 17, 2024.

3.4. Challenges of communicating with students

Most academic institutions were not able to update and contact their staff and students in the early months of the war, as they lost hardware, servers, technical and logistics capacities. Most of these institutions have not updated their online pages and websites. Universities and colleges in the Strip, especially those with branches in the northern governorates, are still trying to contact and communicate with their students through internet and social media platforms, hoping to give them directions whenever possible. In [a press release](#), Al-Quds Open University condemned the direct attacks on its buildings and headquarters in Gaza governorate, which caused severe damage which will hinder the continuation of the educational process once the genocidal war stops. The University immediately exempted its students and new enrolments from paying the tuition fees in all of the five branches it operates in Gaza (over 6,000 students).²¹ Some universities and colleges urged their students to register as visiting students at universities in the West Bank, upon the Ministry of Education's decision (cf. below) that the universities in the northern governorates have quickly followed, in a serious attempt to salvage the academic year.

However, these steps remain largely symbolic; there are no clear instructions to staff, and students are facing challenges related to communication as the quality, cost, and even availability of internet has limited the success of these initiatives.

3.5. Two Cohorts Lose an Academic Year

The war in Gaza deprived 88,000 university students in the Gaza Strip of attending their educational institutions. However, there are two cohorts that have been deprived of the chance of taking up university education, and who have not been included in statistics. **The first** consists of high school students of the year 2023 who joined universities and colleges in Gaza, but did not join a regular study process. The semester was scheduled to begin by the end of September, but with the war starting in October 2023, not a single student was able to complete even a single academic hour. **The second cohort** consists of high school students from the 2023-2024 academic year (according to the educational calendar in Palestine). These students were supposed to sit for exams in June 2024. Even if they later register in West Bank universities, students in Gaza will still need academic support and follow-up, especially in light of power and internet outages.²² The number

²¹ ""Al-Quds Open University" responds to the destruction of its buildings in Gaza by exempting students of the Strip from tuition fees". Al-Quds Open University Website. March 6, 2024. <https://www.qou.edu/ar/viewCmsContentDtl.do?contentId=83045>

²² Personal interview, lecturer at the Faculty of Middle Eastern Studies affiliated to Al-Azhar University in Gaza, Rabah Abdel Jawad, April 2, 2024.

of students expected to sit for the high school exams this year is 38,000 students, marking the first time that the high school exam in Palestine has been disrupted since 1948.²³

The situation of the school education sector is no different from that of the higher education sector. As of February 2024, 78% of schools were damaged,²⁴ with more than 15,000 children killed by mid-May 2024,²⁵ tens of thousands injured, thousands disabled, and an unspecified number orphaned through the loss of one or both parents.

4. Supporting Higher Education in the Gaza Strip: Palestinian initiatives

In the five months following the beginning of the genocidal war, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research announced the implementation of a plan to enable the resumption of educational processes for students in the Gaza Strip. Based on decision “Instructions No. (1) for the year 2023 regarding the visiting students in higher education institutions”,²⁶ this plan has enabled West Bank universities to admit students from Gaza. Most West Bank universities subsequently created online portals to communicate with students in the Gaza Strip.

This effort has been coordinated by a special technical committee in the Ministry, which includes representatives of higher education institutions led by the council of higher education.²⁷ Universities of Gaza are represented by Al-Azhar university and the University of Palestine in this committee, which sits alongside the council of the universities’ presidents, where all of the universities are represented. In June 2024, the ministry organized several follow-up meetings, one of which was intended to register university departments for early evaluations. While these efforts were led by the Ministry, and universities have voiced hopes for restarting the educational process and salvaging the academic year, they have raised major challenges which require effective

²³ The genocide war in Gaza is burning the dreams of high school students. Palestinian Media Center. May 30, 2024. <https://palinfo.com/news/2024/05/30/892108/>

²⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/ar/gaza/education?hub=102070>

²⁵ 15,000 child martyrs and 145 journalist martyrs have been killed in Gaza. Al Jazeera. May 16, 2024. <https://2u.pw/mCSLOM3p>

²⁶ Instructions No. (1) for the year 2023 regarding visiting students in institutions of higher education, Official Gazette, issued by the Diwan of Official Gazette, Issue No. 198, Ramallah, Palestine.

²⁷ The Palestinian Council for Higher Education was established in the late 1970s to supervise and coordinate higher education institutions. In 1994, a decree was issued for the Council to continue its tasks in planning, developing and supervising higher education in coordination with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. According to the decree, the Council is constituted by a president, a vice president, a rapporteur and members representing university presidents, academic experts and educators.

policies to be implemented efficiently, especially to improve communication services and facilitate the access of students to host universities.²⁸

The committee and other related bodies are still developing the means to manage this emergency and ongoing efforts, but they are facing several challenges, including the ongoing destruction wrought by the war, continuous displacement, poor internet connection and persistent challenges in updating data.²⁹

Accordingly, in February 2024 the Ministry of Education and Higher Education launched “a plan for resuming the process of higher education in the southern governorates and for recovery and reconstruction immediately after the end of the Occupation's aggression”.³⁰ This plan acknowledges that it is difficult for higher education institutions in the Strip to quickly return to their previous state, in light of the reality that the war has imposed. Therefore, the ministry has built its interventions on three main points: firstly, deepening connections between higher education institutions in the West Bank and those in the Strip through the visiting student program; secondly, the gradual return of higher education institutions in Gaza to functionality, according to the prevailing circumstances; and lastly, facilitating student access to the internet.

Therefore, the Ministry has presented a quick compliance program that is based on the following six pillars:

1. Utilizing infrastructure that has not been damaged, in accordance with the cooperation framework among higher education institutions in the southern governorates.
2. Achieving cooperation among Palestinian higher education institutions across the two halves of the nation.
3. Increasing opportunities for collaboration between higher education institutions in the southern governorates and their counterparts outside of the Strip.
4. Mobilizing support for programs and plans that aim at the restoration and reconstruction of what the Occupation has destroyed in all components and aspects of the higher education sector.
5. Providing a program for psychological and social support and intervention for higher education institutions staff and students in Gaza.

²⁸ Personal interview, General Manager of the Palestine Planning Center, Atef Al-Muslimi, on April 20, 2024.

²⁹ Personal Interview, The coordinator of the special committee of the Higher Education of Gaza, Rabee Abu-Shamleh, on July 08, 2024.

³⁰ Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Palestine. "Plan for resuming the process of higher education in the southern governorates and for recovery and reconstruction immediately after stopping the occupation's aggression". (Unpublished document). February 2024.

6. Adopting programs specialized in preparing and qualifying human resources in higher education institutions, and seeking assistance from external competences.

In the same context, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education held a meeting with the presidents of Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through video conference on 24 April 2024 chaired by Minister Amjad Barham. The meeting discussed ways to aid the educational process in the Gaza Strip. The essence of the meeting was summarized in two key points within the approved plan: first, the reactivation of the educational process as part of a relief effort, specifically through the Ministry's initiative to enroll students from Gaza in the higher education institutions in the West Bank as visiting students; second, the reconstruction of educational institutions destroyed by the Occupation, with the Ministry affirming that it will spare no effort to achieve the desired goals of the plan.³¹ In parallel, the Ministry has intensified its work with universities to conduct quality control analysis and build assessment tools, through successive meetings of Admissions and Registration directors at universities participating in this initiative.

Before moving to the initiatives in the West Bank, several universities in Gaza had undertaken some preparations to start the new academic year online (as was the case with the Islamic University and Gaza University). These universities urged their students to register, but they still faced challenges in communicating with their staff, with questions raised about the ability of the staff and their students to maintain stable internet connectivity.

This plan is complemented by several initiatives launched by universities in the West Bank, such as Birzeit University, An-Najah University, Al-Quds University, and the Arab American University. All these initiatives, which we detail below, are in line with the guidelines proposed by the Ministry, and can be seen as part of the visiting student program.

University ³²	The Initiative	Details
Birzeit University	"Rebuilding Hope"	10,000 students have registered. 4,700 students have enrolled in 155 courses taught by 140 volunteering professors.

³¹ Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Palestinian Universities Presidents Council, discusses ways to aid the educational process in higher education institutions in Gaza, Wednesday, April 24, 2024. <https://2u.pw/qwC3seYG>

³² The data was obtained through personal interviews and from open databases on the institutional websites. The numbers are not fixed, and change each semester.

An-Najah University	Enabling Gaza's students to continue their higher education "Hand in Hand Rebuilding Hope"	In coordination with the Mediterranean Universities Union and the Palestinian Student Support Fund, with 10 companies including the <i>Agence universitaire de la Francophonie</i> . 3,000 students have enrolled in 193 courses taught by 100 lecturers from inside the University and 200 lecturers from outside.
Al-Quds University	An initiative to record the second semester 2023/2024	Lectures are recorded so that students can get access to them when they are connected to internet. Students are required to complete the tasks assigned to them. 2,405 students are registered, 500 of them have submitted applications to join the clinical training.
Arab American University	An initiative to record the second semester 2023/2024	2,000 enrolled students
Al-Quds Open University	Al-Quds Open University Initiative	Opening registration for new students to get enrolled at the University at no cost.
Palestine Technical University	Integrating students of the Gaza Strip in the educational process.	Enrolling the students of the Gaza Strip in the University's courses and programs
Hebron University	Special semester	Enrolling the students of Gaza Strip in special courses
Palestine Polytechnic University	Special semester	Enrolling around 1,000 students in 30 courses taught by volunteering professors from inside the University within a special semester.
Bethlehem University	Special summer semester	Opening registration for Gaza university students as visiting students for the online special summer semester
Dar al-Kalima University	A special summer semester as part of the "Right to Education, Right to Life" initiative	Opening registration for Gaza universities' students as visiting students for the online special summer semester

5. Supporting Higher Education in the Gaza Strip: regional and international initiatives

The following Table summarizes major regional and international initiatives, some which include local partnerships, to support higher education institutions in Gaza:

Initiative	Local/Regional/ international player	Intervention/ Action	Progress
Emergency call of Universities in Gaza	Gaza Universities' Staff	Call for: 1. Public Pledges to Rebuild Gaza Universities. 2.Immediate Support for Online Instruction.	Open Call
Academic Solidarity With Palestine	Non-Profit Organization - Paris	Helping Gazan students resume their studies, through online teaching.	Working with Al-Najah university, which sets up the virtual classrooms and organizes the courses. Around 300 Gazan students in courses as varied as Electrical Engineering, Introduction to Python, French Writing or Discrete Mathematics
Scholars Against the War on Palestine (SAWP)	Transnational Coalition	Call to end the war and the Scholasticide on Gaza. And supports the Palestinian Academic call.	
Technical Education Support for Higher Education Students (TESI)	UNIMED (Mediterranean Universities Union) Funded by AUF (French University Agency)	Joint Initiative with Al-Najah University and the Palestinian Scholarship Fund to launch the visiting student program.	The first semester of the initiative is finished.
Researchers in War	The Arab Council for Social Sciences (ACSS)	Small grants to researchers in Gaza to write about the war.	
A4G	Online	An international network of volunteer scholars from	Conducted several educational meetings

		diverse academic backgrounds who provide online tutoring sessions, seminars, and tailor-made lectures to the students of Gaza, addressing specific needs of students.	with universities and students from Gaza. Supports several of the West Bank universities in the visiting student program, mainly by volunteer academics.
OxPal	Non-Profit Organization- UK	Support for Palestinian medical students who have been displaced, working to transfer them to medical schools around the Middle East and Europe by negotiating with medical schools to accept these students to let them finish their studies, raising funds for their fees/ living costs and basic supplies, and providing them with interim teaching until they can be restituted	Ongoing
PSSF's Gaza Initiative	Non-profit organization - US	Over the span of 5 years, their goal is to raise \$10 million exclusively dedicated to Gaza. These funds will be utilized to assist stranded students outside of Gaza, facilitate online education through partnerships with universities in the West Bank, and contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza's educational infrastructure. Vital materials and equipment will be provided to students, ensuring a seamless transition for both them and the universities.	Several partnerships with Palestinian universities in the WB and GS, mainly to support online education.
GEM (Gaza Educate Medics)	PalMed Academy	To establish a dedicated program to support Palestinian medical students in Gaza. Their aim is to provide them with the necessary	

		resources, training, evaluation, and opportunities to advance their education and contribute to the future healthcare workforce in the Gaza Strip.	
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Beside these initiatives, the committee has undertaken open discussion about specific interventions which are needed to bring relief, protection, and restructuring to the higher education sector of Gaza, as mentioned in the table below:³³

Partner	Items of Discussion	Level of progress
The American Consulate of Jerusalem	The Consulate has suggested creating online platforms to gather all of the American related initiatives, volunteers, and interested institutions. The Committee asked for help in relation to communication solutions. The Committee asked for support in developing a concrete survey of losses. One of the major demands of the committee was to support offering large servers, to make one more backup copy for the universities' documents, as the first stage in creating a national documentation center.	Early Discussions
The University of Lahore	The University suggested hosting Palestinian students on their campus. The committee doesn't encourage such interventions, due to several political sensitivities. The committee suggested that they instead support online infrastructure.	Early Discussions
Adam Smith International	Developing the needed online infrastructure. Developing a unified learning management system. Creating virtual labs.	Early discussions

³³ Personal Interview, Rabee, Abu Shamleh, ibid.

6. Challenges in implementing support initiatives

The acceleration and expansion of the war have together posed challenges to implementing the plan, which began its first phase with the “visiting student” system for the academic year 2023/2024. In addition to preventing the first-year students from actively taking part in this process, the enlargement of the war’s affected areas, the catastrophic results of its weapons, the destruction of digital infrastructure, and the continuous displacement of people, presents huge challenges to the effectiveness of online education. The major obstacle thus remains the continuation of war, which makes everyday life uncertain and forces people to remain in emergency conditions. The need to eke out a means of survival, to constantly escape from death and to fight to get food, have come to assume far greater priority than education. Similarly, the continuing blockade poses real difficulty insofar as it slows down the prospects for reconstruction and, above all, contributes to isolating the academic institutions, teachers and students of the Gaza Strip, complicating any support initiative.

6.1. The Overall Psychological Context

The war is still ongoing and the psychological conditions that both students and academics are experiencing are incredibly arduous. The psychological context is characterized by constant anxiety, instability, lack of personal and collective security, compounded by the psychological effects of material and human losses. This was felt when we conducted the interviews with academics: many of them were unable to speak and express their opinions, apologizing for not being able to think and speak about their experiences. Some of them have lost family members, while others have lost colleagues, in addition to the material losses they have suffered. As for the students, all they wish for is an end to the genocide and to go back to their universities – often voicing these desires as if they do not believe that the universities have been completely destroyed. Upon receiving his acceptance letter as a visiting student in Birzeit University, Mohammad Bareka, an Information Technology student at the Islamic University, asks: "How can a student study, knowing that they could be killed at any moment, or that a missile could fall on his/her house or the houses of his/her neighbors?". Faras Dahlees, a Media student at the same university, says: "The general mood of students is extremely bad due to the conditions of the war and the ongoing Israeli crimes."³⁴

6.2. The Priority of Basic Life Essentials over Education

³⁴ Yasser Al-Banna. "Will West Bank universities succeed in compensating Gaza students remotely?" Al-Jazeera. 29th April 2024.

The daily life of both academics and students is often filled by the search for water and food. In the absence of urgent and real alternatives, this makes it difficult to resume the educational process, especially since most universities and academics have suffered severe damage.³⁵ Since the second month of the war, essential basic goods have been obtained by people only after waiting in long queues for many hours. Family members spread out across various queues to obtain food or water, or to get access to health facilities. During gas shortages, other family members go out to search for firewood for cooking.³⁶

6.3. Unstable Residence

People in the Strip face the constant threat of displacement and dispossession. The Israeli forces declared that areas beyond the Gaza Valley are safe. However, Khan Younis was invaded, causing the residents to flee to other areas – this after many have already been displaced several times. This leads to a lack of stability that might threaten the process of remote education.³⁷ Moreover, instability in access to temporary shelter centers has worsened after the invasion of Rafah, leading to renewed displacement of around one million Palestinians from Rafah to the central areas. There are no safe shelters in the Gaza Strip because all areas, without exception, are under attack.

6.4. Uncertain Future and Unfair Opportunities

The suspension of university education and the halted enrollment of students in the current academic year have caused university students to lag behind their counterparts in the West Bank and in the world, and have greatly increased the uncertainty of their future opportunities.³⁸ The genocidal war has created the conditions for inequality in accessing educational and job opportunities for the students of the Strip, especially for those who are living under the army siege, such as in northern Gaza. The lack of a clear path for students to complete their education and graduate in the coming semesters, combined with the absence of job opportunities due to the collapse of all economic sectors, has led many students to postpone their university studies.³⁹

³⁵ Personal interview, member of the General Secretariat General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions and a lecturer of Sociology, Salama Abu Zaiter, on Thursday, April 18, 2024.

³⁶ Ahlam Al-Faleh. "Gaza.. Queues for Everything and the Result is "bits"". Nawa. April 17, 2024. <https://2u.pw/yLVhgqvq>

³⁷ Personal interview, associate professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Al-Aqsa University, Abdelhamid Al-Firani, on Tuesday, April 16, 2024.

³⁸ Personal interview, economic and social expert, Omar Shaaban, Wednesday, April 22, 2024.

³⁹ Personal interview, Director of the NGOs Network in Gaza, Amjad Al-Shawwa, Wednesday 17th of April 2024.

6.5. Digitization and Technology Issues in the Gaza Strip

In light of the ongoing war, the Gaza Strip is witnessing frequent disruption in electricity supply and internet connection – the basics of online education. Many faculties and specializations need laboratories, and others require constant academic follow-ups. Many students in the Strip have not been able to register in the universities of the West Bank, as “visiting students” due to the lack of internet connection and electricity.⁴⁰ These issues increase the challenge of implementing the universities’ initiatives and the Ministry’s decisions in relation to the northern governorates. Telecommunication networks have been disabled dozens of times in different areas of Gaza since October 7th, leading to complete interruptions of internet services (10 times in total), some of which have lasted for weeks. Such interruptions are not temporary, as about 72% of communication towers have gone out of service.⁴¹ Moreover, data shows that around 11 individuals with expertise in information technology have been assassinated, and that all technological institutions in Gaza have been destroyed.⁴² The Euro-Mediterranean Observatory has also documented cases where civilians have been targeted, either by snipers or by drones, while they were trying to access internet or communication signals.

6.6. Online Registration of Gaza Students in West Bank Universities as "Visiting Students"

Many Gaza students are registering at universities in the West Bank electronically without really recognizing the challenges that they will face. However, while the actual registration may not prove challenging, the process of trying to study in a tent along with displaced family members can be incredibly difficult. Moreover, there are differences in the academic plans and teaching courses among the Palestinian universities. Therefore, registering as a "visiting student" without coordination and emergency plans to ensure continuity in the educational process often remains ineffective.⁴³

Furthermore, some specializations require taking practical and applied courses. Given the crisis of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the later attacks on the Gaza Strip in 2021-

⁴⁰ Personal interview, program producer at Palestine TV and a lecturer on an hourly basis at several universities in the Gaza Strip, Ahmed Awad-Allah, Wednesday, April 17, 2024.

⁴¹ The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy issued a joint press release on World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, which is marked on the 17th of May. Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

<https://www.mtit.pna.ps/home/news/22991?culture=ar-SA>

⁴² Personal interview, Project Coordinator at the Center for Development Studies in Gaza - Birzeit University, Ghassan Abu Hatab, April 20, 2024.

⁴³ Personal interview, assistant professor in the Department of Business Administration, and former Vice President for Administrative Affairs at Al-Azhar University, and Deputy Secretary-General of the General Union of Palestinian Economists, Marwan Al-Agha, on Wednesday, April 17, 2024.

2022, and now the genocidal war in 2023-2024, an entire cohort of students has not been able to engage in any practical work during the course of their studies at universities.⁴⁴

Data of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education indicates that approximately 50,000 visiting students have applied to various higher education programs in different areas of the West Bank. Several thousand of them enrolled in the first phase, which represents only a fraction of the size of the higher education sector in Gaza. In parallel, the Ministry has started preparing the necessary procedures to authenticate courses and documents electronically. Consultations have also continued to facilitate the enrollment of Gaza students in universities abroad, especially in Egypt and Qatar. Follow-ups have been implemented by the Palestinian Ministry of Finance regarding the dues of higher education institutions in Gaza, while preparations continue for the launch of the Arab Platform for Digital Education, in cooperation with the Arab Universities Union and the Arab Union for Digital Economy.⁴⁵

7. Suggestions for complementary Interventions

Despite the current circumstances of the higher education system in Gaza Strip, the significant human and material losses suffered by students, academics, and administrators which have manifested in a number of challenges, it is still possible to pursue multiple paths to overcome these challenges and to salvage the academic year for higher education students. This is imperative, especially in light of the loss of the academic year for students in the primary and secondary education stages.

The initiatives mentioned above still face several challenges and questions related to fragmentation and duplication, non-coherent interventions, and financial resources. The institutional context of this sector – the Ministry and the major three related bodies (the Council of Higher education, the council of universities’ presidents, and the related technical committee) – are supposed to coordinate these initiatives and its interventions by conducting transparent and continuously updated needs assessments and mapping the existing interventions.

In this regard, we present a set of practical proposals, some of which form part of the existing discussions related to this sector, within the following framework:

⁴⁴ Op. cit. Amjad Al-Shawwa.

⁴⁵ Prominent achievements and activities within the framework of implementing a plan for aiding the educational process in the Gaza Strip, 25 May 2024. Ministry of Education and Higher Education / Higher Education and Scientific Research Sector. (Unpublished report).

Framework of Proposed Interventions

Intervention	Description	Essential Requirements	Challenges and Obstacles	Impact
Establishing mobile academic incubators	Creating logistically specified sites in the form of caravans or large tents, which include the necessary infrastructure for e-learning, such as high-speed internet, electric power sources, and locations for defending theses.	On-site coordinator. Infrastructure that includes electricity "solar cells" and high-speed internet. Caravan or tent with specific coordinates to provide the means to attempt to protect it.	Unstable situation in the camps and continuous displacement. Direct targeting of camps in some locations. High number of citizens outside the camps. Capacity in the field to provide sufficient incubators for students.	Overcoming the issues of internet and electricity instability, and ensuring the students are continuously attending their lectures. Providing an interactive academic environment, even if limited, that engages students in the educational process again.
Launching the Student Academic Interaction Program in Social Sciences / popular education	Creating decentralized student working groups that include students and graduates of the same specialization (even if they are coming from different universities) in the same residential area. This is intended to build a popular, interactive academic program for students in which graduates or students in advanced academic years can transfer knowledge to students in their second and third years, according to a national popular education program devised	A location in each residential community center, according to each stage of the project	Individuals' priority is to obtain food and water and to ensure their security Ensuring sustainability and continuity	Engaging students in a process of popular education which interacts with the community The ability to establish popular education committees, for higher education levels, that cover the whole Gaza Strip.

	through coordination among universities.			
Academic program for archiving the war and Gaza before war	The current war poses a major challenge in terms of archives and their destruction. Gaza's academics must therefore be integrated into the heart of the archiving work as soon as conditions allow. This is one way of re-establishing relevant activity during the war and following through to the post-war period (this study is an example of what can be done).	Set up an administrative and financial systems for the payment of services, which may involve finding local intermediaries	The ongoing war and the continuous displacements produce high levels of insecurity for any field work.	Creating a reliable database for academic work.
Simulation labs (that require long truce and stability)	Establishing simulation labs for scientific specializations, especially for the Engineering and Science faculties. Labs to be located in fixed locations in the Strip.	Technical and technological requirements to set up labs at specific locations	The end of war or a long-lasting ceasefire does not appear on the horizon.	Overcoming the difficulty of accessing laboratory supplies, including equipment and materials
Establishing a unified digital platform for higher education services in Gaza.	Establishing a platform that provides constant interaction among students, graduates, academics and the higher education institutions to obtain academic support services, such as documents and personal letters of admission, endorsement and nomination.	Universities' databases	Lack of digitized databases in some universities Difficulty in allocating administrative staff.	Facilitating access to necessary data for students and graduates, especially that there are students who wish to join foreign universities

<p>Establishing a higher education relief fund in Gaza</p>	<p>Launching a national and international call to gather aid for higher education. This is envisaged as operating through donations to a unified fund, with local-international governance arrangements that support the mentioned interventions and provides resources for higher education staff in phase of aid phase (while not yet considering the reconstruction phase).</p>	<p>A supervision committee and local – international governance arrangements</p>	<p>The priority of the financing to be directed towards aid</p>	<p>Providing resources to pay the salaries of the employees and fund the interventions</p>
<p>Strengthen collaborations between Palestinian universities and universities around the world.</p>	<p>Collaborations can take the form of individual sponsorships and scholarships, in coordination with Palestinian universities, to professors and doctoral students to enable them to quickly return to their academic activities in the Gaza Strip, possibly by giving distance courses or participating in research and publication programs, while allowing them to remain involved in Palestinian academia.</p>	<p>Coordination with Universities and academic networks abroad</p>	<p>The risk of inequality, based on the individual relations of each university or the political classification in other cases.</p> <p>The limited internet connection.</p>	<p>Keeping academics updated and involved.</p> <p>Supporting local universities of Gaza in academic crisis management by bringing international experience and support</p>
<p>Giving a voice to Palestinian universities and knowledge producers</p>	<p>Organizing conferences, publishing research and inviting academics from Gaza to take part is also a way of reinvigorating the Gaza Strip and breaking its isolation.</p>		<p>These academic initiatives are still fragmented and non-systematic, which makes overlapping possible.</p>	

8. Conclusion

The proposals contained in this report are not exhaustive, and there obviously remains a great deal more to do. These proposals will need to be further explored in collaboration with various stakeholders. Our study makes it possible, however, to initiate dialogue with some of these actors and institutions, and we hope that the publication of this study can allow us to advance further reflection on the future of Palestinian higher education, starting from the Gaza Strip.

Some of the losses endured as a result of the ongoing genocidal war are already irreversible (the deaths of staff and students, the total destruction of cultural infrastructure and heritage). There is therefore an urgent need to take seriously the challenges posed by the conflict to the fate of the younger generations – as well as future generations.

The diagnosis provided here, along with the practical proposals presented, offer an opportunity for us to emphasize the urgency of the response that must be provided to this sector, whether during the war or in its immediate aftermath. We also hope that this study can serve as the basis for a more in-depth discussion about the direction of the Palestinian education system in the context of war and genocide.

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