Israeli attacks on educational, religious and cultural sites in the Occupied Palestinian Territory amount to war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination, UN Commission says

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/israeli-attacks-educational-religious-and-cultural-sites-occupied>

Israel has obliterated Gaza’s education system and destroyed over half of all religious and cultural sites in the Gaza Strip, part of a widespread and relentless assault against the Palestinian people in which Israeli forces have committed war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, said in a new [**report**](https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/59/26) today.

While the Commission paid special attention to the situation in Gaza, the report focuses on attacks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as a whole, and in Israel.

“We are seeing more and more indications that Israel is carrying out a concerted campaign to obliterate Palestinian life in Gaza,” said Navi Pillay, Chair of the Commission. “Israel’s targeting of the educational, cultural and religious life of the Palestinian people will harm the present generations and generations to come, hindering their right to self-determination.”

The Commission found that Israel used airstrikes, shelling, burning and controlled demolitions to damage and destroy more than 90 percent of the school and university buildings in Gaza, creating conditions where education for children, including adolescents, and the livelihood of teachers have been made impossible. Over 658,000 children in Gaza have had no schooling for 20 months.

Israeli forces committed war crimes, including directing attacks against civilians and wilful killing, in their attacks on educational facilities that caused civilian casualties. In killing civilians sheltering in schools and religious sites, Israeli security forces committed the crime against humanity of extermination.

The Commission documented and investigated several cases of burning and demolition of educational facilities by Israeli forces which it concluded were deliberate and unnecessary. Israeli soldiers recorded and distributed videos in which they mock Palestinians and Palestinian education, before destroying schools and universities. The Commission considers such acts as indicative of the Israeli security forces’ intent to destroy these facilities to curtail Palestinians’ access to education in the long-term.

The Commission also found significant evidence that Israeli security forces seized and used educational facilities as military bases or staging areas for military activity, including transforming a part of the Al-Azhar university’s Al-Mughraqa campus to function as a synagogue for the troops. The Commission found one instance where the military wing of Hamas had also used a school for military purposes. Such conduct violates the provision of customary international humanitarian law that requires parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the education system has suffered from increasing military operations by Israeli security forces, the harassment of students, and an increase in checkpoints, demolitions and settler attacks which have affected more than 806,000 Palestinian students. Israel has done little to prevent or prosecute settlers who have intentionally targeted educational facilities and students to terrorise communities and force them to leave their homes.

Israeli authorities have also targeted Israeli and Palestinian educational personnel and students inside Israel who expressed concern or solidarity with the civilian population in Gaza, resulting in their harassment, dismissal or suspension and in some cases humiliating arrests and detention. Israeli authorities have particularly targeted female educators and students, intending to deter women and girls from activism in public places.

“Children in Gaza have lost their childhood. With no education available, they are forced to worry about survival amid attacks, uncertainty, starvation and subhuman living conditions,” said Pillay. “What is particularly disturbing is the widespread nature of the targeting of educational facilities, which has extended well beyond Gaza, impacting all Palestinian children.”

Attacks by Israeli security forces have damaged more than half of all religious and cultural sites in the Gaza Strip, part of a wider campaign to destroy civilian targets and infrastructure through airstrikes and shelling. Israeli attacks also targeted religious sites that served as places of refuge, killing hundreds of people, including women and children. The Commission concluded that Israeli security forces knew or should have known the locations and significance of Gaza’s prominent cultural sites and should have planned all military operations to ensure no harm.

All ten religious and cultural sites in Gaza investigated by the Commission constituted civilian objects at the time of attack and suffered devastating destruction for which the Commission could not identify a legitimate military need. Artefacts were destroyed, removed or looted.

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Commission found that Israeli authorities have appropriated, developed and profited from cultural heritage sites representing Palestinian, Jewish and other cultures, displaced Palestinian residents from those sites, and blocked or severely restricted Palestinians from accessing such sites.

In East Jerusalem, frequent militarised incursions, arrests and harassment against worshippers and religious figures in Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount have resulted in severe restrictions of freedom of worship and, on several occasions, ignition of wider conflict. Israeli authorities limited access of Palestinian worshippers to the site while allowing increased access of Jewish worshippers. The Commission emphasises that, while some actions by Israeli security forces at the site may have been linked to security justifications, these should be considered within the broader context of Israel’s illegal occupation, settlement activity and support to settlers, and the erosion of the status quo. Israel’s actions are governed by the law of occupation, the occupying power’s obligation to ensure public order and safety, and international human rights law regarding the use of force, which must be necessary and proportionate.

“Attacks on cultural and religious sites have deeply impacted intangible culture, such as religious and cultural practices, memories and history,” said Pillay. “The targeting and destruction of heritage sites, the limiting of access to those sites in the West Bank and the erasure of their heterogenic history erode Palestinians’ historical ties to the land and weaken their collective identity.”

In its recommendations, the Commission urges the Government of Israel to immediately end attacks targeting cultural, religious and education institutions and seizure and military use of such institutions; immediately end its unlawful occupation of Palestinian territory and cease all settlement plans and activities, including those conducted in or endangering religious and cultural sites; and comply fully with the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice.

The Commission calls on the Government of the State of Palestine to ensure the protection, preservation and development of cultural heritage sites, including those representing non-Palestinian heritage, and to safeguard artefacts. The Commission calls on the de-facto authorities in Gaza to cease using civilian objects for military purposes.

The Commission’s [**report**](https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/59/26) will be presented to the Human Rights Council’s 59th session on 17 June 2025.