

Israel Setting Gazans Adrift from National Identity, Nullifying Their Claim to Palestine

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The Russian bombardment and siege of Ukraine has captured the attention of the world and the Western powers are arming, funding and providing political and humanitarian support for the Ukrainians. Meanwhile, Palestine has slipped off the global agenda and besieged, blockaded and bombed Gaza has become invisible.

Among the masses of foreign correspondents currently in Ukraine are a few who have reported on damage to Ukraine’s cultural heritage. UNESCO has revealed that at least 35 sites have been damaged, although none of those on the organisation’s World Heritage list have been affected, thus far.

On February 23, the day before Russia invaded Ukraine, Al Haq, the Palestinian human rights organisation, released a report entitled, “Cultural Apartheid, Israel’s Erasure of Palestinian Heritage in Gaza”. The report is based on an investigation by Forensic-Architecture, a research organisation based in London, which managed to virtually reconstruct key ancient sites in the Israeli-occupied and bombarded Gaza strip.

Al Haq and Forensic-Architecture accuse Israel of using strategic strikes to erase Gaza’s rich cultural heritage, thereby denying Palestinians, as Al Haq put it, their “right to self-determination over their cultural resources, and by extension threatens their existence as a people”.

Around 12,000 archaeological sites have been surveyed in the Palestinian territories since the 1967 Israeli occupation. Three West Bank Palestinian sites have been chosen for UNESCO’s World Heritage List: the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, the Old City of Al Khalil (Hebron) , and the cultural landscape of southern Jerusalem around the village of Batir. UNESCO dubbed the latter: “Palestine, Land of Olives and Vines”, as the hills around Batir is terraced for olive orchards and vegetable gardens which are watered by traditional underground networks.

Since Jerusalem's Old City and its walls are disputed, UNESCO has not assigned them to either Palestine or Israel.

The State of Palestine has submitted three sites in Gaza to UNESCO for consideration.

Situated near Al Shati refugee camp, Anthedon Harbour is the oldest known port on the Gaza Mediterranean coast. Anthedon Harbour, which was seriously damaged during Israel's 2021 bombing of Gaza, was inhabited between 800 BC to 1100 AD and served as a major trading hub on the commercial route between Europe and the Levant.

The ancient Roman settlement of Tel Umm Amer, the birthplace of St. Hilarion, near Al Nusairat village on the Gaza coast. The settlement was located on the road connecting Mesopotamia to Egypt.

One of the most important coastal wetlands on the eastern Mediterranean is Wadi Gaza which stretches 105 kilometres from the Negev hills and the southern Hebron heights to the East Gaza truce line and follows a circuitous route for seven kilometres through Gaza. The wetlands is not only rich in diversity of flora and fauna, but also a staging area for migratory birds.

These sites delve deep into Gaza's history as a land bridge between between Egypt and Mesopotamia/Iraq and the Levant and, on the continental scale, between Africa and West Asia. Gaza was a crossroads of multiple civilisations: Egyptian, Greek, Mesopotamian, Persian and Arab, to name the key empires which impacted on this narrow coastal strip until Israel was established, imprisoned Palestine in an alien occupation and halted traffic along the Palestinian coast.

During its 1948-49 war, Israel drove the inhabitants from cities, towns and villages into Gaza where refugees now count for 70 per cent of the strip's 2.1 million people. The destructive impact of this influx and long-term presence on Gaza's rich cultural heritage cannot be calculated. Contractors building housing, infrastructure, and manufacturing plants have both destroyed heritage sites and made extensive collections of ancient Greek pottery, coins, and Islamic relics while fishermen and swimmers continue to discover and sell antiquities washed onto beaches or dredged up from the sea.

In 2008, builder Jawdat Khoudary opened a one-room museum, called Al Madhaf, to display some of his treasures. Located off the coast near the Shati refugee camp, I-Madhaf welcomes bus loads of school children who have little knowledge of the long history of their beleaguered and impoverished. I visited Al Madhaf in January 2009 after it was struck by shrapnel and pottery smashed when Israel bombed a nearby sports field during its 2008-2009 attack on Gaza.

A second museum has been opened at Al Qarara, an ancient site south of Gaza city, by Muhammad and Najla Abu Lahia. The collection features artifacts from 4,000 BC through the Roman, Byzantine, early Islamic and Ottoman empires and includes wooden ploughs, horse saddles, baskets and items used half a century ago.

During Israel's 2014 offensive, Al Haq reported the destruction of 61 and damage to 120 mosques and partial damage to a church. During the May 2021 Israeli onslaught both ancient and modern and heritage sites were targeted or indirectly damaged due to bombing of nearby areas as well as 124 places of worship. Among the sites struck were the Great

Omari Mosque, the second oldest in Palestine; the Kitib Al Walaya Mosque, the historic Church of Saint Porphyrius, and Tal Umm Amer and the ruins of Saint Hilarion monastery.

Al Haq has called on the International Criminal Court to initiate prosecutions of Israel for targeting cultural property as this “fundamentally affects the core of [Palestinians’] identity and [their] existence as a people” and constitutes a crime against humanity”. Furthermore, destruction of cultural heritage which takes place under an illegal apartheid regime is also a crime against humanity.

By destroying Palestinian connections to their land, the civilisations which have ruled Gaza, and its distinctive culture, Israel seeks to set Gazans adrift from their national identity and nullify their claim to Palestine. This is what Daesh tried to do by devastating the heritage of Syria and Iraq with the aim of destroying the millennial identities of Syrians and Iraqis so they would submit to the cult’s harsh, uncivilised regime.

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