

Briefing Paper: Rapid Assessment of Higher Education Institutions in Gaza

Introduction

A new report by UNESCO examines the material, human and educational damage sustained by 26 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Gaza during 50 days of conflict between 7 July and 26 August 2014. This paper provides a brief summary of the report's findings.

The severe escalation in hostilities at that time involved intense Israeli aerial and naval bombardment and Palestinian rocket fire. The crisis was unprecedented, causing large-scale destruction and displacement. As of 15 October 2014, a total of 2,205 Palestinians (1,483 civilians) and 71 Israelis (4 civilians) were killed and an estimated 14,000 housing units were destroyed. Around half a million Palestinians were displaced at the height of the conflict (with over 100,000 still displaced) and 108,000 remain homeless.ⁱ

There was a failure to protect education from attack during the 50-day crisis. In addition to kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and other education centres,ⁱⁱ HEIs were directly targeted during the hostilities, sustaining significant injury and loss of life among staff and student populations, as well as damage to vital infrastructure, including buildings and equipment. Such attacks have had a devastating impact on access to higher education and have implications for long-term development.

Impact on students and staff

Students at HEIs were disproportionately affected by the conflict. Those who were killed during the conflict constitute *more than a quarter* – or 27.4% - of *total civilian deaths* incurred in Palestine during that period.ⁱⁱⁱ Even considering the exceptionally high ratio of people aged 15 to 29 to the total over-15 population (53%),^{iv} this is a shocking statistic.



Damage to Islamic University

A total of 421 HEI students were killed during the conflict, primarily by shelling, and 1,128 were injured. Nine academic and administrative staff from the HEIs were killed and 21 injured. A number of injuries have led to disabilities including mobility, hearing and visual impairments which will impact on individuals and their families throughout their lives. Education also suffered high impact, with the loss of a generation of new teachers, education managers and administrators in the Gaza Strip. The loss of vital academic staff is also likely to impact seriously on the quality of education available in the HEIs.

Students have been left traumatised by the impact of the conflict. Many HEIs reported heightened violence among male students, frustration, lack of motivation, depression, lack of concentration, withdrawal, denial of psychological problems, 'intense crying', grief, sadness, nervousness, and aggression. Unable to cope, many students have not returned to their studies. HEI leaders also reported that trauma and psychosocial distress is impacting on academic and administrative staff: their willingness to work, their mental well-being, and the quality of their teaching.

In total, 1,016 individual teaching days were lost over the summer semester, indicating the extent of the interruption to academic study caused by the crisis. It can be extremely difficult for students to recover lost educational opportunities and recurring investment in education can often be disrupted post-emergency by the damage done to infrastructure.

Students who were injured or otherwise affected by the crisis have been exempted from fees by a range of HEIs as part of a package of measures to encourage a return to education. Families of students who have been killed have also not been asked for fees owed. The economic impact of this policy is expected to be significant, creating major financial shortfalls.

Impact on infrastructure

Fourteen HEIs were damaged during hostilities, some directly targeted, others suffering collateral damage. Many of these institutions are experiencing severe disruption to academic and administrative operations as a result. The total estimated cost of repairs to and replacement of HEI buildings, facilities and equipment is US\$ 16,088,597.^v

Plentiful evidence has been gathered of the shelling of academic and administrative buildings; the collapse of classrooms, conference halls and scientific laboratories; wrecked computers and video conference facilities; hallways littered with rubble; campuses strewn with broken glass, twisted metal and the detritus of war – which disrupt, deter and halt the provision of the right to education for all and have potentially long-term impacts on the quality of teaching and learning.

Higher education leadership and academics in Gaza recognise that emergency planning in HEIs is currently weak and lacks co-ordination and that psychosocial support for staff and students is inadequate. Improving co-ordination between HEIs and establishing a shared emergency response would provide physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection to young people and strengthen capacity and preparedness of academic and administrative staff to deliver quality education, even in times of crisis.



Al Azhar Agricultural College Greenhouses

What next?

The failure to treat learning environments as safe spaces and protect universities from attack is a serious violation of the right to education and is prohibited under international law. The resulting staff and student attrition, alongside loss of life, injury and damage to infrastructure, seriously undermines the quality of education which should be supporting young people to achieve their full potential as well as helping to mitigate psychosocial impacts of armed conflict by providing stability, normality, structure and optimism about the future. Sadly, there will likely be consequences for the provision of already stretched basic public services across Gaza, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and economic hardship throughout the territory.

Funding and capacity strengthening is now urgently needed to safeguard the right to higher education in Gaza and ensure that structures can be put in place to enhance resilience and protect universities from attack.

UNESCO calls on the international community, including donors and civil society groups, to provide active support in the following two key areas:

Mobilise financing to fund the reconstruction of the HEI sector and to stabilise financing to fund student grants and reduce impact of non-fee payment on staff salaries. In addition to the estimated costs of vital infrastructure repair and rebuilding, funds are needed to improve protection and emergency planning, psychosocial support, inclusive education, and the quality of teaching and learning, all of which are important priorities.

Establish a higher education working group in collaboration with the education cluster to strengthen the protection of HEIs in Gaza and the right to education under international law. This could include:

- Rigorously monitoring attacks on HEIs and using that information to devise effective, co-ordinated responses.
- Strengthening accountability measures.
- Establishing preventive measures, such as early warning systems and rapid response systems for attacks.
- Encouraging HEIs to develop best practices in protecting education from attack.
- Ensuring educators and their families who are displaced are offered protection and encouraged to return.^{vi}
- Training staff in emergency and evacuation planning as well as first aid training, alongside academic contingency planning.
- Strengthening psychosocial support for staff and students.
- Ensuring inclusive approaches to building design and pedagogical practice are established and supported.



University of Palestine, conference hall before (left) and after the 50-day crisis

For more information and to obtain the full assessment report, contact:

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ⁱ Source: UNOCHA www.ochaopt.org/content.aspx?id=1010361 Accessed 18th November 2014.

ⁱⁱ Initial estimates by UNDP put total material damage across the whole education sector at USD\$16,397,254. This breaks down as follows: kindergartens \$633,600; schools \$7,384,478; education centres \$1,016,703; higher education institutes \$7,362,473. Data supplied by UNDP 16th November 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Calculation based on UNOCHA figures (1483 civilian deaths) as at 14th October 2014. Source: UNOCHA www.ochaopt.org/content.aspx?id=1010361 Accessed 18th November 2014.

^{iv} UNOCHA ONS statistics quoted in www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20415675 Accessed 20th November 2014.

^v This estimate is for HEIs only and is based upon UNDP figures for infrastructure repair and reconstruction combined with data collected by UNESCO for this assessment which calculated the costs of damaged equipment and facilities (see Section 4 for details).

^{vi} For a comprehensive set of international and national recommendations to protect HEIs, see Global Coalition for Protection of Education from Attack (GCPEA). UNESCO is a member of the steering committee. www.protectingeducation.org/goals-and-recommendations Accessed 20th November 2014.