



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: [office@brismes.org](mailto:office@brismes.org)

Website: [www.brismes.ac.uk](http://www.brismes.ac.uk)

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The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1A 2AA

The Rt Hon Lord Cameron  
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP  
Secretary of State for Education

Sent via Email

30 January 2024

Dear Prime Minister and Secretaries of State,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Board of Trustees and Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to ask that the British Government put pressure on Israel to ensure the immediate end of the systematic destruction of the education system in the Gaza Strip, and to stop government and corporate British arms sales to the Israeli military until the International Court of Justice issues its final ruling on whether Israel is committing genocide.

In light of the provisional measures issued by the ICJ, BRISMES considers the systematic destruction of schools and university buildings, including laboratories, libraries and classrooms, alongside the killing of students and staff, as part of a genocidal strategy aimed at destroying in whole or in part the Palestinian education system within the Gaza Strip. Given that the Foreign Office has '[serious concerns](#)' about Israel's compliance with international law, the UK government's support of Israel's military, including the trading of weapons, can potentially be interpreted as complicity in war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

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Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90



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Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, in the UK and globally.

The education system in Gaza is made up of over 625,000 students and about 22,500 teachers and professors, all of whom have been impacted by the war. As [documented](#) by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, since the beginning of the war, 4,327 students have been killed and 7,819 others injured, while 231 teachers and administrators have been killed and 756 injured during the ongoing attacks. The Israeli army has also killed 94 university professors. The number of students and educational staff killed in such a short period is unprecedented in the region's history.

The destruction of educational infrastructures is also unprecedented. During the war's first 16 weeks, 345 out of Gaza's 737 schools were destroyed or damaged, and as we write about 30 percent of school buildings will be out of service even after a ceasefire is implemented. Consequently, hundreds of thousands school children who have already been deprived of education for several months will not have a school to return to once the Israeli forces' attacks subside. Moreover, Israeli forces have attacked multiple schools serving as temporary shelters, killing Palestinians who sought refuge after the Israeli military had displaced them from their homes. In November 2023, for example, Israeli forces attacked the UNRWA-run Al-Fakhoura and Al-Buraq schools, killing at least 40 people and wounding many others, while in December 2023, its forces killed 15 Palestinians in attacks on Shadia Abu Ghazala School.

Higher education infrastructures have also been heavily targeted. The Geneva-based independent Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor has documented Israel's systematic destruction of every university in Gaza. The [Islamic University](#) and the University College of Applied Sciences were bombed on the 11th and 19th of October respectively. On 4 November, Israeli forces bombed [Al Azhar University](#), the second largest university in Gaza, followed by the destruction of [Al Quds University](#) on the 15th of that month. Gaza University was destroyed on 4 December, while Al-Aqsa University, and the Palestine Technical College were also severely damaged. On January 17, 2024, Israel circulated images of the complete destruction in a controlled detonation of [Israa University](#), the last remaining major university in the Gaza Strip.

Alongside the wholesale decimation of the physical infrastructure of higher education in the Gaza Strip, including, for example, the looting of 3,000 rare artifacts by Israeli soldiers who occupied Israa University before they demolished it, Israeli forces have killed [many members of Gaza's](#)

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[academic community](#), including numerous internationally respected scholars, who comprised part of the region's intellectual leadership. These include Professor Sufian Tayeh, president of the Islamic University of Gaza, Professor Muhammad Eid Shabir, a microbiologist and Tayeh's predecessor at the university for 15 years, Dr. Said Al-Zubda, the president of the University College of Applied Sciences, and Professor Refaat Alareer, a co-founder of the 'We Are Not Numbers' project, and one of Gaza's most prominent intellectuals. Completely ignoring this context, as late as January 28, 2024, Israel's Education Minister went so far as to characterise calls made by several other government ministers and Knesset Members to resettle Gaza as '[Super Legitimate](#)'.

The systematic indiscriminate targeting of the Palestinian education system is a war crime and a crime against humanity, as defined by the 1998 Rome Statute, and appears to be an integral part of the broader pattern of elimination emphasized in South Africa's application to the International Court of Justice. In its recent ruling, the ICJ determined that Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip can plausibly be interpreted as a violation of Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Moreover, the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, which is part of international customary law, obliges contracting parties to refrain from targeting civilians and civilian objects and take all feasible measures to avoid injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects and suspend any such attacks. Finally, International Human Rights Law, particularly Article 13 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, prohibits state parties from systematically jeopardising the availability and accessibility of education. In this context we would like to remind you of Resolution 2601 adopted in 2021 by the United Nations Security Council, which "strongly condemns the continued attacks as well as threats of attacks that are in contravention of international humanitarian law against schools and civilians connected with schools, including children and teachers, and urges all parties to armed conflict to immediately cease such attacks and threats of attacks and to refrain from actions that impede access to education."

In light of all of the above, we would have expected that the British government, and particularly the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education, would publicly condemn the destruction of the education system in the Gaza Strip, underscoring the horrific long term effects this destruction will have on Palestinian society. We further request that the UK government:

1. Suspend all military export licenses with Israel until the ICJ has issued a final ruling on South Africa's application.
2. Reverse the decision to suspend aid to UNRWA schools and commit crucial aid to assist in the rebuilding of the education system in Gaza.

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3. Initiate a series of measures for both the immediate reconstruction and long-term rebuilding of the higher education and research sector in Gaza.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Council and the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom