



Scholasticide in war is devastating for medical research and training

End impunity for targeted attacks on schools and universities

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Deliberate attacks on education in armed conflict need urgent attention. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), comprising United Nations bodies and humanitarian non-governmental organisations, recorded 8566 such attacks in 83 countries in 2024-25, over 40% more than in 2022-23, harming at least 10 600 school and university students and staff.¹ Most recent attacks were in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Palestine, Iran, and Ukraine. The coalition also recorded 1912 cases of military use of educational facilities, including as barracks, firing positions, detention centres, and weapons stores.

The term “scholasticide” has been proposed to describe the targeted destruction of an entire education system, including infrastructure, archives, and staff.^{2,3} This has become common in conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁴ Beyond individual instances of harm to people, damage to buildings, and educational disruption, systemic degradation has direct consequences for health and healthcare.¹

Scholasticide in Gaza

Scholasticide has repeatedly been used as a weapon of occupation and settler colonial violence in Palestine.⁴ In the past three years, Israeli airstrikes have severely damaged or destroyed over 90% of Gazan school buildings, with education disrupted for all 658 000 children, the UN reports.⁵ Every university in Gaza has been destroyed, and more than 200 academics have been killed.⁶ Many legal scholars, UN experts, and human rights organisations have identified this scholasticide as part of a broader genocidal campaign against Palestinian society.^{7,8} Despite this, Palestinians continue to advance their people’s knowledge: Gaza’s scholars continue to send research for international review and publication.

Scholasticide has multigenerational and transnational impact. When researchers are displaced or killed and research continuity is interrupted, the cumulative knowledge needed for regional and global scientific and medical progress stops.⁹ Attacks have disrupted biomedical training and research capacity at the Pasteur Institute of Iran, threatening regional health security.¹⁰

Healthcare and public health workers and infrastructure are also deliberately and systematically targeted in armed conflict, including in Gaza, weakening immediate healthcare delivery and long term system sustainability.^{11,12} Healthcare depends on trained expertise, and schools provide basic healthcare services, such as nutrition monitoring and psychosocial support. When education systems fail, healthcare loses current capacity and systems lose future workforce pipelines.

When universities and hospitals are destroyed it can take decades after fighting ceases to restore infrastructure and staff, including doctors, nurses, and midwives.¹³ More than two decades after the US invasion of Iraq, access to healthcare continues to be limited by reduced research capacity and clinical standards because of shortages of trained workers.¹⁴

Attacks place students and staff at immediate risk of injury and death and ongoing psychosocial distress.¹ Without monitoring and intervention by schools, particularly orphaned children and schoolgirls are at increased risk of further violence and exploitation.

Interrupted education exposes children to long term learning loss, diminishes future opportunities, and has long term impacts on economic rebuilding. In the short term, educational needs include temporary learning spaces, remote and blended learning, psychosocial support, and the rapid rehabilitation of infrastructure.

International humanitarian law

International humanitarian law strictly prohibits attacks on civilian infrastructure for essential services, such as schools and hospitals.¹ Legal exceptions can allow attacks—but only with verified evidence of specific military use of facilities, distinction of combatants from civilians, and proportionality. However, discrete claims of military use cannot justify scholasticide. All parties in armed conflict should affirm these commitments; end the unjustified, deliberate bombing and military use of civilian infrastructure; and ensure safe access to education.

Such attacks have rarely been formally investigated or sanctioned, however. This lack of accountability weakens confidence in the universal rule of law. Gaza shows the failure of global mechanisms to enforce the law. The International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice are assessing the broader conflict and alleged violations of the Genocide Convention; they should also specifically consider systemic attacks on education and healthcare.

Independent monitoring and reporting of attacks on, and military use of, education facilities worldwide are vital. Only 123 states have endorsed the GCPEA’s safe schools declaration, which offers such a mechanism, including the US but not Israel.¹ The international community should apply economic and trade sanctions against perpetrators of scholasticide. The sales of arms that are likely to be used for violations of international humanitarian law should be prosecuted.

Universities, professional bodies, and civil society worldwide have collective responsibility to support education under attack globally, and recovery afterwards through funding, partnerships, reconstruction, and capacity-building directly with victims of scholasticide. Staff, students, members, and governors should insist that these organisations publicly condemn scholasticide and, until compliance with international law is assured, consider adopting boycott and divestment policies¹⁵ and refraining from collaboration with institutions that support or enable scholasticide, as SOAS University of London has done.¹⁶

Education sustains a society's knowledge production—and its collective identity and memory. It is essential to health and healthcare. Scholasticide is a war crime that must end. Restoring human capital, scientific capacity, and institutional continuity are vital. And law based global order demands that perpetrators be held to account.

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