



Damage at Gaza Baptist Church after a blast on December 26, 2023
● RAMABDU/X



The Grand Omari Mosque, bombed by the Israeli army on December 8, 2023
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aging the church and its annexes and leaving hundreds of people dead or injured. So too have the Palestinian Legislative Council's (PLC) memorial monument in the Memorial Park for the Unknown Soldier, symbolising the struggle of the Palestinian people. Jihad Yasin, the ministry's director of museums and excavations confirms, however, that the 2,000-year-old Roman cemetery discovered last year in northern Gaza, containing dozens of ancient graves and two rare sarcophagi made of lead, was "almost completely destroyed" by bombardment. He says the ministry has no information on the condition of the artefacts or of one of the coffins that had been transferred to storage in Gaza. The second coffin was still on site. "If it's [the store] still safe or bombed, we don't know," Yasin says. "If we lose this material, I think we lose a page from our history."

Moreover, Anthoned Harbour, inhabited from 800 BCE to 1100 CE, Gaza's first known seaport and one of three Gazan sites on UNESCO's Tentative List of World Heritage was severely impacted by Israeli strikes, while the main library in Gaza, containing historical documents and books, was partially destroyed. At least six key cultural centres have also been damaged, among them the Rafah Museum, a space dedicated to teaching about Gaza's heritage that housed hundreds of artefacts, which partially collapsed, and Al Qarara Cultural Museum in Khan Younis, which was also badly damaged. In late November, intense Israeli shell-

ing destroyed Gaza City's Central Archive building, which contained thousands of historical documents dating back over 150 years. "These documents represent an integral part of our history and culture," the mayor of Gaza, Yahya Al-Sarraj, said following the incident, highlighting their historical value for the community. Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank posted photos from inside the heavily damaged municipal building. "The Israeli occupation destroys the central archive of Gaza municipality, executing thousands of historical documents, and deliberately razing all life forms; erasing the city and its history. It is worth noting that the archive holds documents more than a hundred years old," it said. The papers housed within the archives held important national records dating back generations and information documenting the history of Gaza and its people, along with plans for Gaza City's urban development. The Rashad al-Shawwa historical cultural centre, a crucial cultural hub founded in 1985 that hosts a theatre and library holding around 20,000 books, also suffered considerable damage and destruction in airstrikes. Israel's bombardment of Gaza also destroyed five bookstores. In addition, the Israeli army has destroyed most parts of the Old City of Gaza City, which contained 146-year-old houses and dozens of historical buildings.

The over 1,600-year-old Monastery of Saint Hilarion at Tell Umm Amer, the late Ottoman-era House of Al-Ghussein, and the Hammam al-Samara are among the other noteworthy locations impacted. In addition, one of Gaza's most important archaeological sites has been largely destroyed by Israel's invasion, according to a report by Forensic Architecture. The investigative organisation used open source and satellite imagery to show that the site, located near Al-Shati refugee camp, had been hit by bombings and then bulldozed for what appears to be a military camp. The imagery also reveals the development of Israeli water pump infrastructure in and around the site, nominally for the purpose of flooding tunnels. Forensic Architecture said the site had been excavated between 1995 and 2005 and that among the items discovered were an Iron Age rampart underneath Achaemenid period houses, Roman and Hellenistic-era structures including an emporium, a tiled fountain on the coast, and a Byzantine cemetery in the north. It noted that other sites were severely damaged, including the 400-year-old Al-Saqqa House, the Sayed al-Hashim Mosque, the Shrine of Al-Khadir in Deir al-Balah city in central Gaza Strip, Sheikh Shaaban Mosque, Al-Dhafar Damri Mosque, Mosque Khalil al-Rahman, Khan Yunis mosque, and the Balakhiya Byzantine cemetery (The Anthonedon of Palestine), northwestern Gaza City which is one of the oldest mosques in Gaza.

International support

Hamas urged UNESCO and other cultural institutions to protect historic buildings in the Gaza Strip. Hamas-run Ministry of Antiquities condemned the "ransacking of historical and archaeological sites" by the Israeli army. "The crime of targeting and destroying archaeological sites should spur the world and UNESCO into action to preserve this great civilisational and cultural heritage," said the antiquities ministry, which estimates that 104 mosques have been razed since the start of the war. Geneva-based rights group, Euro-Med Monitor, said Nov. 20 that Israel deliberately destroyed archeological and historical monuments in the Gaza Strip, and accused it of "explicitly targeting Palestinian cultural heritage." Palestinians also say that the deliberate targeting of Gaza's heritage sites is part of an ongoing effort to suppress Palestinian culture, identity, and, ultimately, their presence on the land. "From displacement of Palestinians to destruction of heritage sites, it's all part of a campaign under which no other connection to the land except the Jewish one should be preserved," political analyst Khalil Sayegh told TNA. Maher Azmi Abu-Samra, an Amman-based architect originally from Bethlehem, said that destroying historical and cultural heritage has the effect of altering the landscape of the Palestinian territory, depriving its inhabitants of their identity. "Behind such acts of destruction, there is a policy of erasure of the identity of Palestinians," he told TNA. "The next generation won't have any connection with the land, their memory will be erased," he added, pointing out how this is part of a strategy to permanently displace Palestinians from the besieged coastal enclave. Drawing a comparison with Daesh terrorist group, the architectural designer said that like the extremist group, the Israeli state is destroying historical landmarks with the view to change the culture of the indigenous people and replace it with "a whole new reality". Abu-Samra, who's among the few architects in the Middle East to design and build using traditional techniques, says that rebuilding ancient structures in their original style won't be possible. Well-versed in the load-bearing construction method, which does not involve the use of steel and concrete, he said: "This traditional technique has vanished nowadays. We don't have skilled craftsmen with such know-how who can redo those sites in the old way". The Ministry of Culture's public relations officer appealed to the international community to protect and restore critical historical buildings in Gaza. "We call on international organisations to stop this 'culturecide,'" she said, urging UNESCO to save Gaza's heritage. Hamas-run Ministry of Antiquities has also recently called on UNESCO to preserve the remaining archaeological and historical sites in the besieged territory. But even with pledges of foreign aid after Israel's war ends, it will be almost impossible to rebuild houses and infrastructure with Israel's blockade in place. Much of Gaza's rich history and culture, meanwhile, could be lost forever. Since Hamas' cross-border attack on Oct. 7, Israel has continued relentless attacks on the Gaza Strip, killing at least 24,400 Palestinians and injuring 61,500, according to local health authorities. The Israeli onslaught has left Gaza in ruins, with 60% of the enclave's infrastructure damaged or destroyed and nearly two million residents displaced amid acute shortages of food, clean water, and medicines.

The Middle East Eye, Arab News, New Arab, Art Newspaper, Anadolu Agency, Asharq Al-Awsat contributed to this article.



A Palestinian man walks past the remains of a Khan Yunis mosque in the southern Gaza Strip, which witnesses said was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike.
● REUTERS

Palestinians are inspecting the debris at the Jaffa Mosque, which was hit by an Israeli bombardment, in Deir el-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, on December 8, 2023.
● MAJDI FATHI/GETTY IMAGES

A view of the damaged historical Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church, where civilians took shelter, after an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City, Gaza, on October 20, 2023.
● ALI JADALLAH/GETTY IMAGES

