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Scholasticide in Gaza: Settler Colonial Elimination, Genocide, and the Crisis of Academic Responsibility

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NICOLA PRATT, NOV 25 2025

In early October 2025, a fragile ceasefire allowed some semblance of education to resume in the Gaza Strip. At Al-Aqsa University, students celebrated becoming the first cohort to graduate since October 2023, a moment of joy amidst devastation. Across Gaza, children returned to learning in buildings with shattered walls, missing desks and chairs, and classrooms still crowded with families displaced by Israel's two-year-long assault. Amid these scenes of improvisation and resilience, the enormity of what has been lost for Palestinian education is impossible to ignore. The widescale destruction of Gaza's educational system during Israel's recent war is not an unfortunate by-product of conflict. It is the latest and most extreme manifestation of what Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi termed *scholasticide* in 2009: the systematic, multi-faceted destruction of Palestinian education. Scholasticide is a central mechanism of settler-colonial elimination and meets the definitional criteria of genocide by targeting the social, cultural, and intellectual reproduction of a people. Understanding this destruction as structural rather than incidental is essential for recognising not only Israel's longstanding policies toward Palestinian education and knowledge, but also the responsibilities and complicities of universities far beyond Palestine.

The Contemporary Reality of Scholasticide in Gaza

The devastation inflicted on Palestinian education since October 2023 has been staggering in its scale and intent (Amer 2025; University of Cambridge, Centre for Lebanese Studies & UNWRA 2024; Al-Mqadma, Dittli & Belotti 2024). Every school and university in Gaza has been damaged or destroyed. Hundreds of educators—including senior professors, administrators, and internationally respected scholars—have been killed. During the first three months alone, Israel killed the President, former President, and several deans of the Islamic University of Gaza, the Strip's largest university (Scholars Against the War on Palestine 2024). Hundreds of thousands of children and young people have endured repeated displacement, severe hunger, dehydration, and the complete absence of the basic tools of study (Hamamra, Mahamid & Mayaleh 2025, Khattab, Migdad & Buheiji 2025). These conditions have barely been alleviated, despite a ceasefire, as Israel continues to restrict humanitarian aid into Gaza.

Writing under siege, Dr Ahmed Kamal Junina, head of the English Department at Al-Aqsa University, described the bodily cost of attempting to continue academic work in famine conditions: "Some days, my stomach cramps as I try to revise a single paragraph... Hunger is loud. I read, but hunger is shouting in my ear. I write, but the maw snaps with every keystroke." His words capture the impossibility of scholarship in a context where survival itself has been placed in jeopardy.

This destruction is deliberate. Scholasticide includes the physical obliteration of educational infrastructure; the killing, starvation, and displacement of teachers and students; the imprisonment of educators; the obstruction of scholarly mobility through checkpoints and permit regimes; the closure of schools and universities; and the prevention of access to books, equipment, and international academic exchange (Scholars Against the War on Palestine 2024). It is a strategy that aims to sever the conditions through which a society sustains itself intellectually and culturally.

A Longstanding Settler-Colonial Strategy

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The recent assault represents an intensification, not a rupture, in a decades-long pattern of targeting Palestinian education (Salameh 2025). Israel has systematically undermined Palestinian knowledge systems since 1948. The Nakba, which forcibly displaced around half the Palestinian population, shattered educational institutions and fractured intellectual communities. Israeli forces looted, confiscated, and destroyed Palestinian libraries and archives during the 1948 expulsions, again during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and repeatedly after the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem (Masalha 2012).

Throughout the First and Second Intifadas, Israel closed Palestinian educational institutions for prolonged periods and regularly invaded university campuses, arresting students and damaging property. In 2022, Israel introduced new visa restrictions that effectively prevented most international scholars from teaching or conducting academic exchange with Palestinian universities—an official articulation of a long-standing unwritten policy. I myself was prevented entry to the Occupied West Bank in 2009 after I told Israeli border officials that I intended to travel to Birzeit University to give a talk.

It is not only educational infrastructure in the Gaza Strip that has been targeted since October 2023. Israeli forces forcibly shut down three UNRWA schools in East Jerusalem in May 2025, after the Knesset designated UNRWA a “terrorist organisation.” A few weeks prior, they raided the Educational Bookshop, a major Palestinian cultural institution, arresting its owners and confiscating books containing the word “Palestine.”

International humanitarian law is unequivocal: cultural and educational institutions are civilian objects and must not be targeted. Yet the assault on Palestinian education has been systematic, sustained, and intentional (Salameh 2025). As Patrick Wolfe (2006) argued, settler colonialism is a structure driven by the logic of elimination. Destroying Indigenous knowledge systems—curricula, archives, languages, and institutions—is integral to this logic. Scholasticide in Palestine mirrors patterns seen across other settler-colonial contexts, where dispossession of land is inseparable from the dispossession of culture and learning (amongst others, Deloria Jnr & Wildcat 2001).

Scholasticide as a Genocidal Modality

To grasp the full significance of scholasticide, it must be recognised as a distinct modality of genocide (Dominguez 2024, Giroux 2025). Under the 1948 Genocide Convention, genocide comprises not only killing members of a group, but also the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, including the targeting of the conditions for social and cultural continuity. South Africa’s case accusing Israel of genocide at the International Court of Justice in January 2024 detailed the destruction of schools, universities, libraries and other historical centres of learning, in addition to the killing of academics and educators, as part of the destruction of Palestinian life, and the September 2025 findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, affirm the relevance of this interpretation. Scholasticide directly targets the “conditions of life” upon which collective survival depends. The levelling of universities, the killing of educators, the destruction of archives, and the disruption of access to education for children and youth create long-term societal harms. Genocide is not simply the elimination of bodies; it is the elimination of the possibility of collective continuity. Destroying education is, therefore, not collateral damage but a strategic attempt to annihilate Palestinian futures.

Yet scholasticide receives far less attention in public discussions of genocide than acts of mass killing. Part of the reason is that its violence is structural and cumulative, unfolding through the steady dismantling of the institutions that enable intergenerational survival. This is a form of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011), even as it accelerates dramatically during periods of intense military assault. In Gaza, the intergenerational impact is profound. The loss of teachers, academics, early-career scholars, and entire cohorts of students creates a rupture that will shape Palestinian intellectual, cultural, and scientific life for decades to come.

Recognising scholasticide as a genocidal strategy clarifies what is at stake: the survival of Palestinian society as a collective project. Naming it as such is not merely descriptive; it is an ethical imperative.

Western Universities and the Myth of Neutrality

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Against this backdrop, the response of universities in Western countries—institutions that claim to champion critical inquiry, academic freedom, and global citizenship—has been strikingly inadequate. The Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza has called on the international community to support the rebuilding of Gaza's universities, provide technical assistance for online learning, expand scholarships, and strengthen research cooperation. Yet most universities in the UK, US, and Europe have offered little more than silence, often justified through claims to "neutrality."

Where interventions have occurred, they have most often been limited. Over the summer of 2025, UK universities lobbied the government to waive biometric requirements for a small group of Palestinian students from Gaza who had been awarded scholarships to study in the UK. This was a life-saving intervention, given that visa centres were closed due to Israeli bombardment. But it affected fewer than one hundred students and did nothing to address the devastation facing the tens of thousands of students in Gaza whose universities have been destroyed, whose teachers have been killed, and whose futures remain uncertain. Supporting the evacuation of a small number of individuals is not the same as supporting the reconstruction of Gaza's higher education system.

More troubling than inaction is the material complicity of Western universities. This takes two related but distinct forms. First, many institutions invest substantial sums in companies directly implicated in Israeli violations of international law. Research by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign shows that UK universities collectively hold hundreds of millions of pounds in shares across a wide range of corporations enabling Israel's military occupation and genocidal assault on Gaza. These include arms manufacturers, but also other firms such as Google, Airbnb, and Barclays bank, whose services, listings, or financial products support the infrastructure of occupation, illegal settlements and the Israeli military. When universities profit from the companies whose technologies, logistics, or capital sustain these violations, they are not neutral actors; they are financial participants in the systems that destroy Palestinian life.

Second, universities also receive extensive research funding from the arms industry itself. An investigation published by *openDemocracy* in December 2023 revealed that UK universities have taken almost £100 million from major defence companies—firms whose weapons, surveillance systems, and military technologies are currently deployed in Gaza. This funding shapes research agendas, deepens institutional entanglement with militarism, and normalises collaboration with corporations directly involved in ongoing mass violence. The distinction between investments and research funding matters, yet both forms of entanglement highlight the same reality: universities are structurally embedded in, and financially reliant on, the very industries that make Israel's colonial domination of the Palestinian people possible.

This material entanglement is reinforced by the suppression of campus solidarity. In the US, police were repeatedly deployed to dismantle student encampments opposing Israel's assault. In the UK, universities threatened students with costly legal action for occupying campus spaces, while disciplinary procedures proliferated. Students have been surveilled, materials displaying solidarity with Palestinians have been removed, teach-ins and even lectures have been cancelled. Universities declare their commitment to academic freedom, yet repeatedly silence Palestine solidarity.

These dynamics reveal what scholars Basma Hajir and Mezna Qato (2025) call the "scholasticidal tendencies" of UK universities: institutions whose actions undermine Palestinian educational survival by upholding the structures that destroy it. The failure of Western universities to act in solidarity with Gaza's academic institutions reflects a deeper, systemic racism in which Palestinian scholars are rendered intellectually disposable. This racism exposes the hollowness of universities' narratives about cosmopolitan education and global citizenship. In a webinar with Gaza-based academics, Dr Ibrahim M. Alsemeiri described the struggle to continue writing without electricity or internet, having lost 25 kilograms due to hunger. His plea to the international academic community was to, "Please, see me and the others as scholars and scientists, not just survivors." His words make visible the profound inequity at the heart of Western academia—an academy that claims global reach yet refuses to recognise Palestinians as full participants in its intellectual life.

Rebuilding, Responsibility, and Solidarity

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In a context of mass displacement, hunger, and infrastructural collapse, education may appear secondary. Yet resisting scholasticide is essential to resisting the wider logics of settler colonialism and genocide. The future reconstruction of Gaza—for *Palestinians themselves*, not for external powers or private corporations, as the current US administration imagines—depends on Palestinian universities, researchers, and educators. Young people need functioning educational institutions not only to rebuild Gaza's physical infrastructure but also to rebuild its intellectual, cultural, and scientific life.

Despite unimaginable hardship, Palestinian educators and students continue to teach, study, and create (Amer 2025). Universities in Gaza have offered online instruction since summer 2024. Teachers conduct classes in tents and makeshift spaces. Students persist in preparing for exams and completing coursework. Their determination testifies to the centrality of education in sustaining collective life.

What they demand from the international academic community is not charity, but solidarity. Across campuses globally, students and staff have mobilised to demand that their universities divest from arms manufacturers, technology firms, and corporations complicit in Israel's occupation, apartheid, and genocide. These campaigns insist that institutions must align their financial practices with the ethical values they publicly proclaim. In many cases, those who speak out—students staging encampments, staff issuing public statements—have faced disciplinary action, surveillance, threats of expulsion or dismissal. Such repression underscores a stark truth: universities are willing to punish those who challenge their complicity in violence more readily than they are willing to challenge the violence itself.

Supporting Palestinian education therefore also means supporting the people within our own institutions who resist scholasticide. It means standing with students and staff who are penalised for rejecting the myth of neutrality, defending academic freedom when it is exercised on behalf of the colonised rather than the powerful, and recognising that campaigns for divestment are integral to academic responsibility.

Universities are not neutral spaces; they are political and economic institutions embedded in systems of power. When those systems enable colonialism, apartheid, and genocide, neutrality and silence becomes complicity (Shoman et al, 2025). Academic responsibility today requires more than producing knowledge. It requires asking what that knowledge is for, who it serves, and whether we are willing to confront our own institutions' entanglement in systems of violence.

If we claim to teach "global justice," "decolonisation," or "critical inquiry," then confronting scholasticide is not optional—it is a test of the very values we profess. To remain silent is to side with power over justice. To defend students and staff who speak out, to join campaigns for divestment, and to stand in solidarity with Palestinian scholars is to affirm that education itself is a site of resistance. To take a stand against scholasticide is to insist not only on the survival of Palestinian life, but on the survival of our shared humanity; a world that tolerates the erasure of a people is a world that abandons the possibility of justice for anyone.

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About the author:

Nicola Pratt is Professor of the International Politics of the Middle East at the University of Warwick. Her research examines gender, war, and political activism in the Middle East, informed by long-standing involvement in anti-war and transnational solidarity movements. She has published widely on politics in the Arab world and on feminist international relations more broadly. Recent publications include (with Columba Achilleos-Sarll) "Sun, sea and sexual violence: the political economy of party tourism", *International Affairs* 101(4), 2025; (with Hala Shoman, Ashjan Ajour, Sara Ababneh, Afaf Jabiri, Jemima Repo and Maryam Aldossari) "Feminist Silences in the Face of Israel's Genocide Against the Palestinian People: A Call for Decolonial Praxis Against Complicity", *Gender, Work & Organization*, March 2025; and (with Afaf Jabiri, Ashjan Ajour, Hala Shoman, Maryam Aldossari, and Sara Ababneh) the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* Conversations Section, "Why Palestine is a Feminist Issue: A Reckoning with Western Feminism in a Time of Genocide", 27(1), 2025. She is also the author of *Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon* (University of California Press, 2020), winner of the BISA Susan Strange Best Book Prize for 2020. She is currently writing a monograph on politics and popular culture in the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath.