

Joint Statement by the ACHRS and ASAF on the International Day to Protect Education from Attack

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Observed annually on 9 September, the International Day to Protect Education from Attack highlights the urgent need to safeguard students, teachers, and educational institutions from the devastating impacts of armed conflict. Six years after its establishment through General Assembly resolution 74/275, the Day carries greater urgency than ever. In the 2024-2025 reporting period alone, the [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack \(GCPEA\)](#) documented [8,566 attacks](#) on educational facilities, 377 of which specifically targeted higher education institutions– a [40% increase](#) compared with previous years.

The Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (ACHRS), together with the Arab Society for Academic Freedom (ASAF), joins the international community in commemorating this Day, and echoes UNESCO's call for States who have not yet done so to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, which provides guidelines for protecting schools and universities during armed conflict.

Yet existing legal protections are not enough. The systematic destruction of schools and universities is not simply an attack on civilian infrastructure; it strikes at a community's social fabric, collective memory, and capacity to resist. Education– particularly higher education– is a powerful tool of resistance. Its deliberate destruction is therefore not collateral damage, but a form of oppression. This is why, on this International Day to Protect Education from Attack, ACHRS and ASAF call for scholasticide to be recognised as a distinct form of violence– and for those who destroy education to be held accountable.

Education as a Tool of Resistance

Education does more than just transmit knowledge– it gives people the tools to question power. This is particularly true of higher education institutions, which act as knowledge repositories, centers for research, and hubs for community-building.

It is hardly surprising, then, that universities have long been centres of political mobilisation, particularly across the Arab world. In 1935, thousands of students from Giza University– now Cairo University– marched across the Nile into Cairo to protest British intervention. In 2011, the same campus once again became a focal point for mobilisation following Mubarak's resignation. In fact, universities across the region served as pivotal catalysts, hubs of mobilisation, and sites of political transformation during the Arab Spring.

Universities' inherently political role makes them a threat to those in power– a reality also recognised as early as the 20th century. Having learned from their 'mistakes' in Egypt, where the education system they imposed had produced a ["class of intellectuals"](#) who were ["constantly discontented with British rule"](#) and therefore prone to rebellion, British authorities sought to shape education in Palestine to prevent ["the village boy from becoming \[...\] educated and \[...\] prone to nationalism"](#). In a strikingly similar pattern, authoritarian governments across the region sought to curtail university freedom and independence in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, recognising universities as potential threats to their power.

Universities as Battle Grounds

If education is a threat, then warfare turns university campuses into the main battleground. Nowhere has this been more true than in the Arab world. Perhaps the most famous example was the takeover of Iraq's pre-eminent Mosul University by ISIS in 2014. While famously targeted for the uranium held in its laboratories, the University was also pivotal to the group's mission to '[culturally cleanse](#)' Iraq: the burning of its central library destroyed [one million](#) books and manuscripts. This formed part of a wider campaign against higher education, with at least [70 attacks](#) on educational facilities recorded between 2013 and 2017. Likewise, higher education became a key battleground during the Syrian Civil War, with [several hundred](#) educational institutions damaged and air strikes killing more than [1,000 students](#). The [2013 Aleppo University bombings](#), timed to coincide with the first day of exams, were particularly striking given the University's prominent role in anti-government demonstrations, pointing to a broader attempt to dismantle education as a source of political dissent.

While Syria and Iraq offer early examples of the systemic targeting of education in contemporary warfare, such attacks continue today. In Gaza, [all 19](#) recognised higher education institutions have been targeted by Israeli forces, with the total physical damage estimated at [\\$373 million](#). Although certainly the most striking contemporary example, Palestine is hardly the only country that has seen its tertiary education system dismantled in warfare. In Yemen, [Scholars at Risk](#) has consistently documented [attacks](#) on educational institutions by all parties, alongside the [arrest](#) of academics and students, suggesting a deliberate effort to dismantle the country's higher education system. Evidence of the deliberate targeting of educational facilities is also apparent in Sudan, where the RSF's takeover of El Fasher was condemned by the UN as bearing the "[hallmarks of genocide](#)". Among the bloodiest sites was the University of El Fasher, which was [sacked and looted](#) as Zaghawa and Fur students and refugees were killed.

Scholasticide: Beyond the Concept

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) prohibits targeting civilian infrastructure, including schools and universities. [Article 48](#) of Additional Protocol I establishes the principle of distinction, under which "the Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objectives and military objectives". Echoing this language, [Article 52](#) of Additional Protocol I guarantees that "civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or reprisals".

Although the prohibition against the targeting of civilian infrastructure is robust, IHL is limited by its treatment of attacks as individual incidents. As discussed, attacks against educational institutions often represent a concerted, systemic, and deliberate attempt to dismantle academic life, often with the aim of crushing dissent or destroying an ethnic group's heritage. Recognising this gap, Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi developed the concept of scholasticide: the systematic and deliberate destruction of a group's educational system, with the intent to dismantle their identity, history, memory and means of resistance.

While its articulation is relatively recent, the roots of scholasticide stretch back to the drafting of the 1948 Genocide Convention. Early versions of the Convention defined genocide as an act directed against any racial, national, linguistic, or religious group "with the purpose of destroying it in whole or in part, or of preventing its preservation or development" ([E/447](#)). This last provision alluded to the concept of cultural genocide, developed by one of the Convention's key architects Professor Raphael Lemkin. He argued that

a group ceases to exist, not only when it is physically destroyed, but when [“its spirit and moral unity”](#) is too. Reflecting this, early versions of the Convention also specified genocidal acts to be any acts aimed at “destroying the specific characteristics of [a] group”, including through the prohibition of language, systemic destruction of books, and dismantling of cultural and religious heritage ([E/447](#)).

In the end, however, any allusion to cultural genocide was scrapped from the final Convention. At the time, States cited many reasons for this exclusion, including concerns that the idea of ‘cultural genocide’ would prevent assimilation into a national identity, and that it went [“too far in respect to the protection of minorities”](#). While the systemic destruction of educational facilities may not in and of itself constitute an act of genocide, International Court of Justice (ICJ) jurisprudence has established that it may serve as evidence of genocidal intent ([Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro, 2007](#); [Croatia v. Serbia, 2015](#)).

Yet it is not enough that the systemic and deliberate targeting of education is seen as evidence of a crime—it must be treated as a crime in its own right. The international community must recognise that attacks against educational facilities do not result merely in the destruction of civilian infrastructure, but also in the destruction of vital knowledge, experience and centres for community and political mobilisation. The library of Mosul University has been rebuilt, yet the collection of knowledge it lost will never be fully restored. This is not collateral damage, or even just an individual violation of IHL, it is scholasticide. It is time that the international community recognised it as such.

Recommendations

On this International Day to Protect Education from Attack, ACHRS and ASAF call on the international community to recognize the gravity of attacks on education and take meaningful action to prevent them by:

- Recognizing scholasticide as a distinct crime under international humanitarian law (IHL);
- Meaningfully incorporating the reconstruction of educational facilities and academic communities into post-conflict reconstruction efforts;
- Providing support to universities during conflict by facilitating partnerships with foreign institutions to help sustain academic life and continuity of education;
- Holding those responsible for destroying educational systems accountable and ensuring they do not escape punishment; and
- Providing urgent assistance to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) to enable it to continue fulfilling its role, particularly in the Gaza Strip.

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