

From [The Palestine Institute for Biodiversity & Sustainability of Bethlehem University](#) | Original Article

Statement and call for action from the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and the Palestine Museum of Natural History (Bethlehem University) on the Israeli destruction of Palestinian natural and cultural heritage 15 December 2023

The Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and the Palestine Museum of Natural History (Bethlehem University) having good long-term working relations with our cultural and natural heritage institutions and landmarks situated in the Gaza strip watched with horror as these same intuitions were targeted by the Israeli apartheid and occupation army. Here are just selected examples of recent destruction of cultural and and natural heritage:

- 1) Destroying historic churches and historic mosques. See [this](#) and [this](#)
- 2) More than 100 Gaza heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed. See [this](#) and [this](#) .
- 3) [Destroying Al-Qarar Cultural Museum.](#)
- 4) There was a deliberate [attack on Palestinian Institutions of Higher Education](#) including direct attack on science facilities housing important collections and heritage items (both cultural and natural)
- 5) Israel laid hands on Palestinian natural heritage sites and declared many areas ["nature reserves" for political purposes](#) to exclude the indigenous Palestinian people.
Wadi Gaza, a unique wetland habitat is one of the nature heritage sites that has been damaged by previous Israeli military activities, was to be rehabilitated and is now scene of deliberate Israeli destruction. See [this](#) and [this](#) and [this](#) .

6) Israel stole Palestinian heritage books, laid hands on Palestinian cultural heritage sites, and [misused areas declared "national parks"](#)

. See also

[this](#)

and

[this](#)

on looting Palestinian heritage.

We know that the destruction was/is intentional (per UN and International Human Rights groups) and goes hand in hand with intentional targeting of schools, hospitals, UN Facilities, refugee camps, water facilities, streets, and all other facilities to make the Gaza Strip (365 km² or 250 mi²) more unlivable for 2.3 million Palestinians. So far 1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza were displaced (half children) and, as of this writing, over 20,000 civilians killed and 51,000 injured (70% were women and children).

We also know that this destruction has happened in Gaza before the current events; see for example [this report from Al-Haq](#) We know it happened in the destruction of mosques and churches and heritage during the ethnic cleansing of over 500 Palestinian villages and towns during the beginning period of the Palestinian Nakba that started in 1948 and continues today (see [palestineremembered.com](#))

We thus demand the following:

1) From the Palestinian authority and from scholars; document and study this destruction and take Israel to local, regional, and international courts based on global law and signed conventions

2) From the UN to add the destruction of cultural and natural heritage to list of growing crimes of the Israeli state (attempt to destroy heritage of the entire nation of Palestine is defined as genocidal act under the relevant UN Convention) and take appropriate actions.

3) UNESCO (guardian of cultural heritage), Conference of Parties of UN Convention on

Biological Diversity and other conventions that are guardians of global biodiversity) must hold Israel to account and insist on restitution (including of all stolen Palestinian cultural heritage items such as the Qumran scrolls) and/or expulsion of Israel from global organizations.

4) We support and encourage the boycott of institutions and entities complicit in this destruction of Palestinian heritage along the guidelines of the global BDS movement (see [this](#) for the demands and guidelines).

Earlier Statements

8 December 2023 [Christmas Message](#)

20 December 2022 Statement on COP15 for the Convention on Biological Diversity

PIBS which is facilitating the effort to create a new National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) for the State of Palestine with the Environment Quality Authority is very pleased to support the new [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#). Thanks to work from us and many in the Global South, the new framework with its four main goals and 17 targets does take issues like Nature's benefit to people. Our new NBSAP reflects those priorities. Yet, we believe that the ambitious goals (which replaced the Aichi targets that failed) can only succeed if there is serious global, national, and local efforts to implement these.

20 November 2022 Statement on COP27 UNFCCC meeting, Sharm AlShaikh, Sinai, Egypt

PIBS reiterates our statement made (see below) for COP26. We deplore holding such a meeting with 600 lobbyists (the right term for those who represent industries and other groups that damage the environment) in a country notorious for violations of basic human rights of its people including their right to live on their own lands as happened in Sinai itself. We regret the Jordanian-Israeli cooperation announced on the margins of this conference that also violates people's rights

3 Novemeber 2021 Statement on COP26 Meeting in Glaskow, Scotland

Conference of Parties (COP) 26 (the 26th!) on climate change is underway in Scotland with over 50,000 people attending online or in person. The UN Secretary General talked about the climate "emergency" and how we are treating our planet "like a toilet." He and other world politicians are starting to use language that we as activists have used for decades (except we were also acting). We in Palestine and activists around the world are thus not satisfied with the progress to address this existential crisis. We are not satisfied with the blah blah blah of politicians as Greta Thunberg noted. Millions of us have been working hard to change local situations and lobbying our own and global politicians (i.e. thinking globally and acting locally and globally as the world is interconnected). We obviously need and must do more and accelerate this. We are not merely in a "climate emergency" but in a global catastrophe (an Environmental Nakba). We only have 7 years to act at much higher levels. Significant sums of money are being pledged for climate change adaptation and mitigation and for conservation. Yet, money is being misdirected and used mainly to alleviate the guilty conscience of rich countries who exploited and continue to exploit others (dumping money at the problem is not a solution). We have argued in a number of meetings in the past few weeks (about 3 meetings weekly) in the lead to COP26 that among others, these things are needed:

- 1) Liberate minds from mental colonization. This goes beyond the issue of "environmental awareness and education". It goes to issues of learning and empowerment for liberation. Liberating minds from notions of powerlessness and subservience to political leaders. It is nothing short of revolutionary liberation from old ways that shackle brains and developing new paradigms for sustainability and coexistence (with each other and with nature). It involves developing RESPECT (for ourselves, for others, for nature)
- 2) We cannot go back to a pre-COVID19 systems of governance and world structures. The systems dominating world economies like consumerism and capitalism must be changed to develop systems based on caring, empathy, and collaboration both across borders (which eventually should be dismantled) and within borders. A better world is possible.
- 3) We must use our indigenous knowledge, practices, and value systems. Using technology that works together with these should create food sovereignty while protecting the environment.
- 4) We have to have environmental justice. People should be entitled to clean air, clean water, and a healthy environment all around. [see also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for basic rights]

5) We need human capacity building especially in developing countries including restructuring of educational systems at all levels. For example universities now kill creativity & innovation and create conformist consumers instead of helping young people become better innovative citizen activists!

Just as one example of action towards these among hundreds of thousands around the world, we can cite the work of our Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability at Bethlehem University (PIBS, see [palestinenature.org](http://www.palestinenature.org) and our 2020 annual report posted at <http://www.palestinenature.org/about-us/2020-Annual-Report.pdf>). For conservation issues in Palestine, see <http://www.palestinenature.org/conservation/> and our group statement and action plan from “Palestine Action for the Planet”: <http://www.palestinenature.org/palestine-action/> . We (PIBS with the Environmental Quality Authority and other stakeholders) are now working very hard on the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for Palestine (despite the ongoing colonization). It is a lot of work in order to be successful to preserve our human and natural resources: even its desktop study is now >200 pages.