

Statement of the Arab Regional Group at the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on Palestine and the Current War in Gaza - Dated 9th January 2024

The Arab Group is comprised of ICOMOS Arab region national committees and international members from Arab countries. It seeks to achieve equitable and effective Arab representation in ICOMOS and advocates for issues of relevance to the Arab Region in the field of cultural heritage.

As we mark a New Year and following ninety-two days of continued aggression and intense bombing of Gaza in Palestine, Israel has committed more than 1750 massacres and killed more than 23000 Palestinians, of whom 70% are children and women. In addition, 7000 people remain under the rubble of bombarded buildings. This loss amounts to 1.3% of Gaza's population. The aggression of the Israeli Occupying Forces resulted in more than 58000 wounded, hospitals and clinics bombed and more than 85% of Gaza's population forcefully displaced - a scale of killing and destruction that is unprecedented in the region. Residential neighborhoods, refugee camps, hospitals, schools, mosques, churches, water facilities, bakeries, libraries and museums have been targeted by more than 65 thousand tons of "dumb bombs" and white phosphorus (internationally banned since World War II). Even graves have not been spared attacks and desecration by Israeli occupation army soldiers.

In the midst of intense bombardment, which makes no distinction between military and civilian targets or human and cultural heritage, more than 200 of the 325 registered sites in Gaza considered of national or global historic, archaeological, natural, religious and humanitarian importance have been destroyed or severely damaged. This translates to the destruction of more than 60% of Gaza's cultural civil heritage. Gaza has a long and ancient history, which spans civilizations dating back to the end of the Neolithic Era where life first emerged in Palestine. The Gaza Valley civilization particularly the area of Tell el-'Ajjul, on the north bank of the Gaza Valley is considered the earliest human settlement site in Gaza City after which the Gaza Strip is named.

Among the remarkable archaeological sites and monuments that have been partially or fully destroyed are the site of Tell el-'Ajjul, (3rd millennium BC), the site of the Roman Archaeological Cemetery (1st century BC), the Archaeological Site of Tel Umm Amer, also known as St. Hilarion (4th century AD), which is on the World Heritage tentative list and has received UNESCO's Enhanced Protection Status since 14 December 2023, and the Archaeological Site of Jabalia Byzantine Church (5th century AD). Other historical monuments that have architectural heritage and religious and social significance have been damaged, including the Church of St. Prophyrius (5th century AD), the Grand Omari Mosque (7th century AD), which is one of the most important archaeological sites with roots dating back to the (1st century BC). The "Coastal Wetlands in the Gaza Valley", a candidate for World Heritage listing, regarded as a reserve of outstanding universal value rich in biodiversity both plant and animal, is being vandalized, inter alia, since the start of the war and under threat due to the forced migration of Palestinians to the southern areas of the valley which is threatening its environmental balance.

Mamluk era (13th-16th century AD) historic sites and architecture such as mosques, palaces and historical markets of social and economic value have been destroyed. To name a few, the Pasha Palace (1260 AD), the Qisariyah Market (1329 AD) and its historic extension the Zawiya Market, the Mosque of Ibn Othman (1394 AD), and the Samra Hammam (15th century AD), which is the only remaining archaeological bath in Gaza, all have been subject to massive destruction. Even Ottoman-era buildings, such as Al-Sayyid Hashem Mosque (1850 AD) and the Gaza municipality building (1928 AD) were also significantly damaged.

In addition to the destruction of Gaza's architectural cultural heritage and its urban and natural fabric, the aggression has devastated Gaza's intangible heritage with the destruction of museums and the targeted murder of journalists, intellectuals and artists, in an attempt to erase their contributions to Gaza's cultural and living heritage. Many vital community centers working on cultural heritage conservation as well as traditional handicrafts workshops and factories, which not only represent a rich source of local knowledge and skills, but also foster a sense of national identity and most importantly serve as the sole means of livelihood for many Gazans have been decimated.

On the West Bank, Palestinian heritage sites listed as World Heritage in Danger are subjected to systematic and persistent attacks by armed Israeli settlers under the protection of the Israeli army, including the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls (listed in 1981) and its neighborhoods, most recently in the Armenian quarter. In the village of Battir, in the Bethlehem governorate (listed in 2014), settlers took over a large geographical area by placing mobile houses on it. In the old town of Hebron and Al Ibrahimi Mosque (listed in 2017), residents have endured strict Israeli military measures since the start of the war, restricting freedom of movement and preventing prayer at Al Ibrahimi Mosque.

We would like to note several documented official and unofficial statements made by Israeli officials calling for extreme violence against Palestinians and expressing intent to commit genocide. Examples are numerous and include Israeli Heritage Minister Omhai Ben-Elihu who called on November 5, 2023 for a nuclear attack on Gaza, and Minister of Advancement of Women's Status, May Golan, who on December 21, 2023, called for the mass killing of Gaza's people and dumping them in the sea. These and other statements are a flagrant violation of international law, including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in particular article 20, paragraphs 1 and 2; ("Any propaganda of war is prohibited by law" and "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law").

People are the custodians of heritage and the keepers of memory, which makes the deliberate killing and displacement of Gaza's population an attack on all forms of existence, compounded by Israel's use weapons and war strategies prohibited by the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention and all other relevant conventions. Israel is targeting vital social, economic and cultural systems and institutions that form the basis for the continuation of civilian life in Gaza. Furthermore, under international law and in the absence of effective implementation of the peace treaties, the Occupied Palestinian Territory remains under Israeli occupation, and as such Israel is bound by the international conventions and protocols for the protection of the cultural and natural heritage all Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.

This deliberate destruction of Gaza's human and cultural heritage constitutes a war crime and a clear breach of the covenants, conventions and international heritage protection law, specifically the 1972 International Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict and the 2001 UNESCO World Heritage Declaration.

Accordingly, the Arab Regional Group strongly condemns the Israeli Occupying Forces for the brutal and barbaric attacks on Gaza, at a scale unprecedented in our contemporary history, and states emphatically that the killing of civilians, destruction of houses, vandalism of cultural properties and displacement of people of the Holy Land must receive international condemnation and immediate action in defense of human rights and cultural values. Silence on these crimes means consent to their continuation. In this context, the Arab Regional Group calls upon the international community at large, international organizations and all cultural heritage and human rights bodies, and all who stand for peace and justice to:

- **Condemn the ongoing barbaric attacks against Palestinians;**
- **Call for the protection of the Palestinian people, land and heritage;**
- **Call for the immediate cessation of military operations and to mobilize immediate measures to halt atrocities, destruction of heritage, destruction of civilization and environment in Palestine, particularly Gaza;**
- **Mobilize urgent humanitarian assistance to the victims of this aggression;**
- **Impose sanctions against Israel's occupation and those who support its brutal practices;**
- **Boycott companies and institutions supporting Israel's occupation and aggression;**
- **Conduct joint scientific missions to review and assess the damage to cultural and natural heritage and cultural institutions;**
- **Provide technical and material assistance and strengthen local expertise to document, restore, strengthen and rehabilitate cultural heritage and cultural property.**

The Arab Regional Group affirms their willingness to participate in any and all efforts that contribute to the protection of Palestine's cultural heritage in general and in Gaza in particular.

In conclusion, to quote Martin Luther King's historical saying: "The worst place in hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral battles."

Arab Regional Group