



FOBZU ANNUAL CONFERENCE REPORT

Emergency Support for Palestinian higher education:

The Role of the International Academic Community



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Introduction

The 2025 Fobzu Annual Conference, Emergency Support for Palestinian Higher Education: The Role of the International Academic Community, convened at a moment of urgency. What is unfolding in Gaza is not merely a crisis in education, it is what Palestinian academics, UN experts and others have named scholasticide: the systematic and deliberate destruction of the Palestinian education system. This year's conference brought together scholars, university representatives, policy experts, and civil society organisations to respond to that reality and to explore how the international academic community, particularly in the UK, must act.

Fobzu (Friends of Birzeit University) has supported Palestinian higher education since 1978, grounded in a mission to defend the right to education for Palestinians. In the face of this accelerated scholasticide, alongside our long and ongoing collaboration with educational institutions in the West Bank, Fobzu has deepened its coordination with universities in Gaza. At the request of its member institutions, we have been privileged to assist in facilitating the work of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza—the formally mandated body representing Gaza's three non-profit public universities, which together serve over 80% of the Strip's students. As part of this collaboration, Fobzu has worked to amplify the unified voice of Gaza's academic leadership, support the launch of the Isnad emergency support programme, and promote meaningful, equitable partnerships between Palestinian and UK universities.

A historic moment in the conference was the presentation of a unified statement from Gaza's university presidents, subsequently published online on 14th July. The statement reaffirmed the Emergency Committee's representative role and called for urgent international support to end the war, resist scholasticide, sustain teaching and research, and rebuild Gaza's higher education sector.

The conference centred this collective voice and affirmed Palestinian academics not as passive victims or recipients of aid, but as members of academic communities, represented by their universities and through them, equal partners and leaders in the process of ongoing education and rebuilding. It also brought to light the complicity of UK and European states and institutions in the historic and ongoing destruction of Palestinian academic life, highlighting the moral imperative for this to end for redress to begin through a commitment to material solidarity in the present.

Participants called for a sector-wide shift towards concrete institution-to-institution partnerships, drawing lessons from the UK sector's response to the war in Ukraine. These partnerships must aim to support the resilience of Gaza's existing academic institutions, advance their capacity, prevent deliberate 'brain drain', and sustain hope. UK faculty have shown remarkable commitment and readiness to support, but the challenge remains to mobilise this energy into coordinated action backed by institutional and national leadership, accompanied by supportive policy frameworks. This report outlines the key discussions, contributions, and proposals that emerged from the conference, and charts a path forward rooted in partnership, justice, and academic freedom.



Purpose and Objectives



The aims of the conference were to:

- Amplify the collective voice and testimonies of Palestinian higher education faculty in general and Gaza's academic community, in particular – as represented by the Emergency Committee of the Universities of Gaza – during a period of systematic destruction of their institutions;
- Explore the wider context and history of what scholars and UN experts have described as “scholasticide” as well as the role of the international academic community in relation to it;
- Affirm principles of best practice for international academic solidarity and partnership with respect for the integrity of the higher education system in Gaza, institutional autonomy and collective representation;
- Showcase and promote concrete models of effective institution-to-institution partnerships and collaboration;
- Advance coordination and catalyse efforts across the UK higher education sector in response to this emergency.

Conference Programme Summary

Session 1: The Emergency Facing Palestinian Higher Education

Chaired by **Sandra Hamrouni** (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Fobzu), the session featured powerful testimonials and calls from:

- **Prof. Omar Milad**, President of Al Azhar University (in person)
- **Prof. Ayman Sobh**, President of Al Aqsa University (online)
- **Prof. Kamalain Shaath**, former President and Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Islamic University of Gaza (online) standing in for Prof. Asad Asad, President of the Islamic University of Gaza

Fobzu Chair, Sandra Hamrouni opened the conference. Each President or senior representative of Gaza's largest, non-profit university detailed the material destruction of their campuses, the killing of prominent faculty members and students, and the challenges faced by Gaza's universities amid Israel's attempts to completely destroy their institutions. They reiterated that despite the destruction, their universities continue to exist and are determined to fulfil their mission. Last year, Gaza's public universities resumed teaching online, albeit in extreme circumstances – bombardment, lack of steady internet, starvation, and multiple evacuations and displacements. The panel shared the ways in which their faculty, students and administrators have been working to keep education going under these devastating conditions and demonstrated their educational resilience amid the violence. They collectively called for international academic solidarity through material support and institutional partnerships to support the resilience of Gaza's higher education sector.

On the day of the conference, the presidents of Gaza's three non-profit public universities — Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University – Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza — issued a historic unified statement addressed to the international academic community. The statement condemned the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza's higher education institutions as a deliberate act of scholasticide — the systematic targeting and destruction of universities, their infrastructure, and academic communities as part of a broader genocidal campaign. Despite unprecedented devastation, the presidents affirmed the continued existence and resistance of Gaza's universities through ongoing teaching and learning. They issued an urgent appeal for a permanent and sustainable ceasefire, an end to complicity in the attacks, and long-term international partnerships grounded in institutional partnership. Central to their message was a call for academic communities to engage directly with Gaza's universities and with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza as the legitimate, collective voice of Gaza's academic sector. The statement (Appendix 1) marked a significant moment in Palestinian academic advocacy, with an urgent call for coordinated, structural support for the survival and future of higher education in Gaza.



Session 2: Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza

Chaired by **Omar Shweiki** (Fobzu Director), this session introduced the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, the representative body established by formal mandate by Gaza's three non-profit universities in order to resist the erasure of Gaza's higher education institutions, coordinating joint responses and collective partnership efforts among Gaza's universities.

Speakers included:

- **Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban**, Al Azhar University - Gaza
- **Prof. Nasreddin ElMezaini**, Islamic University of Gaza
- **Dr Radwan Abu Rukba**, Al Aqsa University

This session featured representatives of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, who presented the Committee's origins, mandate, and guiding principles, and outlined its urgent priorities for action. The panellists shared that prior to the establishment of the Committee, there was a widespread assumption in the international academic community that Gaza's higher education sector had been entirely destroyed. In the vacuum of collective representation, external responses were often fragmented and misdirected. Support was typically limited to scholarships or fellowships for individuals able to leave Gaza. While this support remains essential, the institutions themselves, along with their staff, students, and academic infrastructure, have often been overlooked. This risked compounding the physical destruction of Gaza's universities with their institutional erasure.

The panellists highlighted the concerning trend of international academic organisations and universities, particularly in Europe and North America, bypassing Gaza's institutions in consultations and decision-making. Instead of engaging directly with universities in Gaza, many had turned to individuals or external 'experts' without any institutional mandate, undermining the very actors at the heart of Gaza's academic community. This, they argued, was particularly troubling given the widely accepted principle that institution-to-institution partnerships are the cornerstone of international academic solidarity – as demonstrated by the UK higher education sector's response to Ukraine. In Gaza's case, however, this principle was being systematically evaded. Alarmingly, panellists noted that some discussions had even explored supporting the establishment of an entirely new university, rather than aiding those that had withstood generations of siege and are now struggling for their survival.

In response to these challenges, Gaza's three non-profit public universities, representing between 80-85% of the student population, came together in last year to establish the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza. While each university retains its own individual representation through active international relations offices and decades of experience in academic partnership, the Emergency Committee now provides the collective voice that was previously missing and is urgently needed. It has enabled Gaza's academic sector to speak with unified authority, articulate shared needs, and counter the erasure that Israel's campaign has sought to impose.

The Committee's first material priority, speakers explained, is financial support to stabilise Gaza's universities by ensuring faculty, who are the backbone of higher education, can receive some salary. This is the rationale behind the Isnad programme, a historic collective fundraising initiative launched in partnership with Taawon (Welfare Association) and endorsed by the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education. Isnad provides scholarships to students, covering their tuition fees, which in turn helps sustain academic staff during a time of near-total economic collapse. It is not only a financial mechanism but both a powerful symbol and practical example of unity and systemic resilience.

Speakers shared examples of how, despite the total destruction of campuses and the trauma of living through war, siege, and starvation, Gaza's academic institutions have continued to function — holding classes online and maintaining a commitment to teaching under dire conditions. They expressed an unwavering resolve to rebuild as soon as a ceasefire is achieved, drawing on a long legacy of educational resilience. Progress has been made, but the work has really only just begun. As the panellists powerfully reminded attendees: Gaza's universities are still here, and their survival, and future, depends on meaningful, direct, and sustained international partnership.



Session 3: The emergency facing Palestinian higher education: The Wider Context

Chaired by **Prof. Leon Tikly** (University of Bristol), this session examined the broader framework of scholasticide in Palestine:

- Dr Areen Hawari (Mada al-Carmel)
- Dr Samia Botmeh (Birzeit University)
- Dr Abdel Razzaq Takriti (Rice University)
- Osama Rishq (Al-Quds University Law Clinic)

This panel examined the broader context and systemic nature of scholasticide across Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and among Palestinian citizens of Israel. Speakers situated Israel's assault on Palestinian education within a long history of settler colonial practices, arguing that the current destruction in Gaza represents an escalation from systematic repression to an attempt at total annihilation of a part of the Palestinian education sector. Dr Abdel Razzaq Takriti (Rice University) underscored that such an unprecedented attack on education could not occur without the material and political backing of powerful states, notably the US and UK. He called for an immediate end to this complicity and urged international actors to build meaningful partnerships with Palestinian academic institutions, pointing to the coordinated response to Ukraine's higher education sector as an example of what is possible.

Dr Samia Botmeh (Birzeit University) traced the long record of Israeli military violence against Palestinian higher education, noting how Birzeit University has been subjected to attacks, harassment, and arbitrary arrests of its students and faculty for decades, attacks that have intensified since October 2023.

She highlighted the growing danger posed by settler violence and new restrictions on movement that have made physical access to campuses in the West Bank even more dangerous. Solidarity, she emphasised, must be material and institutional: it requires direct support and partnership with Palestinian universities, but also active efforts to dismantle the complicity of Western governments, civil society institutions, and universities that maintain ties with Israeli counterparts and systems of repression.



Dr Areen Hawari (Mada al-Carmel) discussed the repression faced by Palestinian students and faculty who are citizens of Israel within Israeli universities, noting a recent escalation in arbitrary arrests and surveillance. She placed this within a broader context of Israel's colonial project, which has long denied Palestinian citizens autonomous academic institutions and an education system that reflects their identity and history. Mada al-Carmel, she explained, plays a vital role in cultivating a Palestinian academic community within this repressive context. Osama Rishq (Al-Quds University Law Clinic) provided a legal and student-centred perspective from East Jerusalem, where students and faculty continue to experience physical assaults, detentions, and intimidation by Israel's military forces, with an alarming increase in such incidents since the war began. Together, the panel made clear that scholasticide is not confined to Gaza but is part of a coherent pattern of practices designed to undermine Palestinian intellectual and cultural life across all geographies, and that international solidarity must respond accordingly.

Session 4: International Support and Partnership I: Principles of Best Practice

Moderated by **Dr Helen Murray** (King's College London), this panel discussed values and frameworks for ethical collaboration:

- **Dr Mohamed Zugbur** (Al Azhar University - Gaza)
- **Dr Chandni Desai** (University of Toronto)
- **Dr Tareq Emtaireh** (Taawon - Welfare Association)
- **Sara Merabti Elgvin** (Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund, SAIH) / **Prof. Monica Rolfsen** (Norwegian University of Science and Technology - NTNU)

Speakers on this panel reflected on their own institutional and national contexts to highlight the critical importance of defending the integrity, continuity, and collective representation of Palestine's academic institutions. They emphasised that solidarity with Palestinian higher education must go beyond individual scholarships or symbolic gestures and instead be rooted in a structural commitment to uphold the right to education as foundational to Palestinian self-determination. Drawing comparisons to the academic mobilisation following the onset of the war in Ukraine, speakers noted how universities around the world rapidly issued public statements, formed institutional partnerships, and launched scholarship schemes to sustain Ukrainian academic life. The panel called for a comparable response to the crisis in Gaza, urging the international academic community to respond with the same clarity, urgency, and institutional commitment.

Dr Mohamed Zugbur, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Al Azhar University in Gaza, provided a first-hand account of the destruction of Gaza's medical schools, emphasising the urgent need for international partnerships to support faculty, students, and the continuation of medical education under siege.

Dr Chandni Desai of the University of Toronto reflected on how the work of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza has begun to reorient solidarity initiatives in Canada—from a focus solely on individuals to coordinated institutional support. She stressed that scholasticide, a feature of settler colonialism, targets not just people but the systems that sustain life and knowledge, underscoring the need to reaffirm the existence of Gaza’s universities and amplify their collective voice. Dr Tareq Emtaireh of Taawon introduced Isnad, a sector-wide fundraising initiative developed in collaboration with the Emergency Committee and endorsed by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Rather than funnelling aid solely to individuals, Isnad represents a coordinated platform to support Gaza’s three non-profit universities, aiming to reinforce institutional resilience and counteract the forces driving academic collapse and brain drain.

From Norway, Sara Merabti Elgvin of SAIH and Prof. Monica Rolfsen of NTNU shared the model of NorPal—the Norwegian Consortium for Palestinian Higher Education. This newly formed network of universities and colleges was established in direct response to the Emergency Committee and its calls for national coordination. Grounded in principles of solidarity, NorPal is committed to mobilising resources and support based on the priorities collectively set by Palestinian academics themselves. The consortium’s approach draws on the experience of the international responses to Ukraine, where leadership remained with the academic institutions targeted. The speakers affirmed that the future of Palestinian higher education must be determined by the Palestinian people and their institutions, and it is the role of international partners to stand in principled and enduring solidarity to help protect and sustain that future.

Throughout the discussion, a number of shared principles of best practice for international support emerged. These include: ensuring that the Palestinian academic community and its collective representative bodies lead in determining their needs and setting priorities; supporting institutions rather than only through fragmented individual aid; working towards forging long-term partnerships rather than solely short-term or one-off projects; and resisting frameworks that fail to respond to the structural and colonial nature of the crisis. Speakers stressed that true academic solidarity means recognising and upholding Palestinian universities not only as educational institutions but as vital pillars of resilience, resistance, and national sovereignty.



Session 5: International Support and Partnership II: Practical Examples and Models of Collaboration

Chaired by **Prof. Rachel Rosen** (University College London), this session showcased successful models of UK–Palestinian academic partnerships, with:

- **Prof. Nazmi Al Masri** (Islamic University of Gaza)
- **Prof. Dina Kiwan** (University of Birmingham)
- **Dr Tanzil Chowdhury** (Queen Mary University of London)
- **Dr Basma Hajir** (University of Bristol)

Chaired by Professor Rachel Rosen (UCL), this session highlighted a range of innovative and effective academic partnerships between UK and Palestinian institutions, demonstrating the possibility and value of meaningful collaboration even under the most challenging conditions. Speakers presented successful models of research partnerships, institutional twinning, and virtual fellowship programmes, offering practical insights into how academic solidarity can be operationalised to support Palestinian higher education. These presentations affirmed that academic collaboration is not only achievable today, it is a vital act of resistance against scholasticide and an important contribution to sustaining Palestinian educational life.

Prof. Nazmi Al-Masri (Islamic University of Gaza) brought decades of experience building international research partnerships to the session. He emphasised that collaborations between UK and Palestinian universities have a long history and have produced benefits for all parties. Focusing on the Culture for Sustainable and Inclusive Peace (CUSP) Network Plus with the University of Glasgow, he underscored the importance of equitable approaches grounded in mutual learning and exchange. As the representative of IUG on the Education and Arts Sub-committee of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, Prof. Al-Masri continues to work on forging new UK partnerships to support Palestinian academic resilience in these fields.

Prof. Dina Kiwan (University of Birmingham) shared reflections from the *Disability Under Siege* project, part of the AHRC-funded GCRF Network Plus Collective Programme. This initiative centres on equitable partnerships between the Global South and North, promoting collaboration between universities, NGOs, artists, educators, and grassroots activists—especially people with disabilities. Prof. Kiwan noted that such models demonstrate the feasibility of meaningful academic cooperation that amplifies marginalised voices and strengthens collective educational capacities.

Dr Tanzil Chowdhury (Queen Mary University of London), Co-Director of the Centre for Law and Society in a Global Context (GLSGC), presented the partnership between GLSGC, the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI), and the Institute of Law at Birzeit University. The collaboration emerged from a Fobzu PALS Fellowship visit to Palestine in 2023 and reflects a shared commitment to academic freedom and critical scholarship. In light of the scholasticide, Dr Chowdhury stressed the urgency of building solidarity-driven institution-to-institution partnerships that protect and promote Palestinian higher education.

Dr Basma Hajir (University of Bristol) introduced the *Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF)*, a co-created initiative between the Centre for Comparative and International Research in Education (CIRE) and three Virtual Fellows from the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Aqsa University. Developed in response to priorities identified by the Emergency Committee of Gaza's Universities, the Fellowship supports scholars through virtual access to research resources, mentorship, academic workshops, and international networks.



Rooted in principles of equity, co-creation, and sustained collaboration, the Fellowship explores the theme “Scholasticide in Gaza”—examining the destruction of educational institutions and its broader implications through the lens of each fellow’s scholarly perspective. The initiative is a powerful proof of concept, illustrating how faculty can mobilise resources from their home institutions in order to forge institutional partnerships that contribute to sustaining scholarship in Gaza in the midst of the war.

Across these diverse initiatives, several key lessons emerged for building ethical and effective international academic partnerships. First, all speakers emphasised the importance of co-creation and equity—projects must be led by and respond to the needs of Palestinian institutions and academics. In Gaza, these have been set out by the Emergency Committee. Second, solidarity must extend beyond individual-level support to include institutional strengthening and systemic collaboration. Third, successful partnerships navigate administrative and organisational challenges by drawing on the large pool of collective experience among colleagues who have developed effective initiatives. These examples offer valuable inspiration and practical guidance for other colleagues and institutions seeking to forge principled partnerships with Palestinian higher education.

Address by the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK

The conference was addressed by the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK. Dr Zomlot underlined the vital importance of the Palestinian higher education sector to the Palestinian people as a whole and the urgency of international partnership to support Palestinian universities in the face of the scholasticide.





Key Outcomes and Reflections

- **Unified Statement from Gaza University Presidents:** Issued on 27th June, calling for urgent support from the international academic community to enforce an immediate and permanent ceasefire, resist the scholasticide and work in partnership to support the continuation of teaching and research, and support the rebuilding of Gaza's universities. The historic statement reaffirmed the official role of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza as representing the unified voice of Gaza's academic community.
- **Amplifying Collective Palestinian Voices:** The conference centred the voices and leadership of Gaza's academic community, affirming their role in defining priorities of international support and as equal partners through their own institutions in any solidarity response.
- **The Role of the UK and European States and Institutions:** Speakers highlighted the areas in which states and civil society institutions have been complicit in both the history and contemporary reality of the ongoing scholasticide in Gaza. The international academic community had a duty to work to end this.





- **Institution-to-Institution Partnerships:** Echoing the UK higher education sector's response to Ukraine, participants stressed the need to focus on partnerships that support the resilience of the higher education sector in Gaza, build capacity of Palestinian universities, and prevent 'brain drain' – one dimension of the 'ethnic cleansing' warned of by the UN.
- **UK Faculty Commitment and the Need for National Leadership:** There is widespread commitment on the part of UK-based academics to stand with their colleagues in Palestine and take action to support them. The challenge now is to ensure leadership at both institutional and sector levels.
- **Role of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza:** The conference underlined as a matter of principle working with the Emergency Committee, the formally mandated legitimate representative of Gaza's public and not for profit universities *collectively*.



Next steps

- **Sector Coordination:** Fobzu will coordinate follow-up meetings and events with Universities UK (UUK), UK and European universities, international partners and key stakeholders, exploring coordination across higher education sectors to support the resilience and rebuilding of Palestinian universities.

- **Promoting Best Practice for Partnerships:** Building on the *Partnerships with Palestine* guide, Fobzu will continue to develop resources and materials in order to promote effective models of institutional partnership and academic collaboration.

- **Conference Report Circulation:** This report will be shared across relevant networks to facilitate awareness and action.

- **Sector-Level Advocacy:** Fobzu and partners will continue to advocate for leadership from the UK higher education sector to provide a response to the higher education emergency in Gaza that meets the urgent needs of Palestinian universities, as set out by the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza. UK universities should work in direct partnership with their counterpart institutions in Gaza, drawing on the Ukraine model as precedent.



Acknowledgements

We honour and express our deepest gratitude to the leadership and faculty of Palestinian universities—especially those in Gaza—for their courage, resilience, and participation in this conference. Our sincere thanks also go to our co-hosts at the SOAS Centre for Palestine Studies, as well as the SOAS faculty and staff who provided vital logistical support throughout. We are deeply appreciative of our conference sponsors and supporters, whose generosity made this event possible. Finally, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all the speakers, session chairs, and participants for their valuable contributions and engagement.





Appendices

- Appendix A. Chair's Speech and Introduction
- Appendix B. Statement from the Presidents of Gaza Universities
- Appendix C. Programme
- Appendix D. Short Biographies of Chairs and Speakers



Opening Speech – Fobzu Annual Conference

Speaker: Sandra Hamrouni, Chair of Fobzu

Good morning, friends and colleagues.

I am deeply honoured to welcome you to this year's Fobzu Annual Conference. Thank you for being here, for your commitment, and for your solidarity.

I would first like to thank the sponsors of today's conference. We are honoured to be supported by institutions and organisations that have shown true commitment to the defence of education and academic solidarity in the most difficult circumstances.

Our thanks go to Al Azhar University – Gaza, the Islamic University of Gaza, Al Aqsa University, Oxford University's Department of International Development, the SOAS Centre for Palestine Studies, the University and College Union (UCU), the Galilee Foundation, and the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF).

Your partnership and support have been essential in making this gathering possible. To our UK partners, thank you for standing with our colleagues in Palestine at this critical time.

Fobzu was founded in 1978 to support Palestinian students and higher education at a time when the struggle for education was already entangled with occupation, exile, and injustice. We began with a focus on Birzeit University, but even then we understood that our mission was connected to the broader struggle for Palestinian education – and by extension, for freedom, dignity and self-determination.

Today, that mission continues – in a context that is more devastating and urgent than any we have faced before.

What we are witnessing in Gaza is not simply an attack on education. It is a scholasticide – the systematic and deliberate annihilation of Palestinian education as a collective, institutional, and societal endeavour. This is not new. It has deep roots in both the policies and practices of the Israeli occupation, and British colonial strategies of control and suppression.

“One might ask, when people can’t eat, why care about education?”

But students and faculty in Gaza have answered that question through their actions. Against all odds they have worked to continue learning and teaching.”

But since October 2023, scholasticide has shifted. What we are seeing is no longer just destruction – it is an attempt at total annihilation. Gaza’s schools and universities have been bombed, students and faculty targeted and murdered, libraries and labs reduced to rubble. This is not collateral damage. This is calculated erasure – of knowledge, of institutions, of culture, of future.

And it is part of a wider genocide that continues before our eyes. Starvation, mass displacement, ethnic cleansing – these are the conditions under which Palestinians in Gaza are trying to survive. One might ask, when people can’t eat, why care about education?

But students and faculty in Gaza have answered that question through their actions. Against all odds they have worked to continue learning and teaching.

Just over a year ago, nearly 200 Palestinian higher education staff and faculty in Gaza issued a call to the international academic community. They made it clear that the goal of scholasticide is not only to kill students or destroy buildings – it is to destroy a system. And so real solidarity must mean standing with the institutions at the heart of that system: the universities.

That's why, in response, Gaza's non-profit public universities – representing over 80% of students in the Strip – came together to form the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza. This committee has become a powerful, unified voice: declaring to the world that Gaza's universities live; and coordinating the rebuilding of the sector on their own terms.

“We must also be honest: at the level of institutions – universities, associations, sector bodies – the response has not yet matched the need or the urgency.”

Since our conference last year, they have achieved something remarkable: the launch of the Isnad programme, in partnership with Taawon. A collective lifeline. An emergency transfusion. Because of the work of Gaza's faculty and the Emergency Committee, the world now knows that Gaza's universities are still here – and that we cannot claim to support higher education in Gaza without engaging directly with its institutions. Most importantly, the universities, catalysed by the Emergency Committee, resumed teaching – an act of resistance, and a refusal to surrender to scholasticide.

Last year we heard directly from members of the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza. Since then, faculty and students across the UK and the globe have stepped up with initiatives of solidarity and support. Many of those pioneers are with us today, and we celebrate their efforts.

This has to change.

The UK higher education sector demonstrated what is possible in its response to the war in Ukraine: we saw a nationwide mobilisation to support Ukrainian universities through institution-to-institution partnerships focused on maintaining their resilience, preventing brain drain, and safeguarding their capacity to educate. These are the very principles we must apply to Gaza now.

This week, as part of Fobzu's UK-Palestine Academic Links programme, we had the great privilege of hosting representatives from the Emergency Committee's Medicine and Medical Sciences and Education and Arts subcommittees. These academic leaders have been holding meetings at UK universities with faculty from across the country to drive forward partnership plans. And what we have seen – again and again – is that the commitment, expertise, and seniority exists here to make these partnerships happen. Plans are now in motion.

Today's conference is a space to advance this collective effort. In our second session, we will hear directly from representatives of the Emergency Committee – the formally mandated body speaking for Gaza's nonprofit universities. In the third session, we will explore the wider historical and geopolitical context of the scholasticide – drawing on experiences from the West Bank, inside Israel, and across the Palestinian diaspora. In the fourth session, we will turn to the principles and frameworks that must guide partnership work, and finally, in the last session, we will explore inspiring practical examples of partnerships and collaborations between UK and Palestinian universities – the models we must now multiply.

But we begin today with the opening session: an opportunity to hear directly from the Presidents of Gaza's three nonprofit universities – the individuals who have led their institutions through this scholasticide and spearheaded the resistance to it.

Let me briefly introduce our three distinguished speakers:

- Prof. Dr. Omar Melad is the President of Al Azhar University, Gaza, appointed in 2021. He holds a PhD in Polymer Chemistry from the University of Valencia and has served in senior academic roles including Dean of Science and Vice President for Academic Affairs. He is a prolific researcher with deep institutional leadership.
- Prof. Dr. Ayman Sobh is President of Al-Aqsa University, and a Full Professor of Applied Mathematics. He holds a PhD in Fluid Mechanics and has contributed extensively to education reform, capacity building, and international collaboration. His research spans biofluid dynamics and heat transfer.
- Prof. Dr. Kamalain Kamel Shaath is the Deputy Chair of the Board of Trustees at the Islamic University of Gaza and President of the Hope Foundation for Education in Istanbul. A former IUG President and graduate of the University of Leeds, he brings a career's worth of academic and community development leadership.

Yesterday an historic meeting took place between the leaderships of Gaza's universities and their UK counterparts hosted by Universities UK, where Gaza's university Presidents presented a collective call for solidarity to the UK higher education sector.

We are honoured to have them with us today, and to amplify their call. I invite you all to listen closely, reflect deeply, and act decisively – for what is at stake is not only the survival of a sector, but the defence of the universal values that education exists to serve.

Thank you.

Sandra Hamrouni is Chair of Fobzu Board of Trustees. She served as British Council Country Director in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Bahrain, Cyprus and Algeria.



Appendix B

Unified Statement from the Presidents of Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University – Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza

We, the presidents of Gaza’s three non-profit universities— Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University – Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza – together accounting for the vast majority of Gaza’s students and faculty members, issue this unified statement to the international academic community at a time of unprecedented devastation for higher education in Gaza.

Israel’s ongoing genocidal war has brought about scholasticide—a systematic and deliberate attempt to eliminate our universities, their infrastructure, faculty, and students. This destruction is not collateral; it is part of a targeted effort to eradicate the foundations of higher education in Gaza—foundations that have long stood as pillars of resilience, hope, and intellectual freedom under conditions of occupation and siege. While academic institutions across Palestine have faced attacks for decades, what we are witnessing today is an escalation: a shift from repeated acts of destruction to an attempt at total annihilation. Yet, we remain resolute. For more than a year we have mobilised and taken steps to resist this assault and ensure that our universities endure.

Despite the physical obliteration of campuses, laboratories, facilities, and libraries, the assassination of our students and colleagues, **our universities continue to exist.** We are more than buildings – we are academic communities, comprised of students, faculty, and staff, still alive and determined to carry forward our mission. As articulated in the Unified Emergency Statement from Palestinian Academics and Administrators issued on 29 May 2024, **‘Israeli occupation forces have demolished our buildings, but our universities live on’.**

Unified Statement from the Presidents of Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University – Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza

For over a year, our faculty, staff and students have persisted in our core mission — teaching — under unimaginably harsh conditions. Constant bombardment, starvation, restrictions on internet access, unstable electricity, and the ongoing horrors of genocide have not broken our will. We are still here, still teaching, and still committed to the future of education in Gaza.

We urgently call on our colleagues around the world to work for:

- **A sustainable and lasting ceasefire**, without which no education system can thrive and an end to all complicity with this genocide.
- **Immediate international mobilisation** to support and protect Gaza's higher education institutions as vital to the survival and long-term future of the Palestinian people.
- **Recognition of scholasticide as a systematic war on education**, and the necessity of coordinated and strategic international support in partnership with our universities for the resilience and rebuilding of our academic infrastructure and communities.

We appeal to the international academic community — our colleagues, institutions, and friends — to:

- **Support our efforts to continue teaching and conducting research**, under siege and amidst loss.
- **Commit to the long-term rebuilding of Gaza's universities in partnership with us**, respecting our institutional autonomy and academic agency.
- **Work in partnership with us**. Engage directly with and support the very institutions that continue to embody academic life and collective intellectual resistance in Gaza.'

Unified Statement from the Presidents of Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University – Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza

Last year, we formally established the **Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza**, representing our three institutions and affiliated colleges – together enrolling between 80% to 85% of Gaza Universities' student body. The Committee exists to resist the erasure of our universities and offer a unified voice for Gaza's academic community. It has since established subject focused subcommittees to serve as trusted and coordinated channels for support.

We call upon academic communities around the world to *coordinate themselves in response to this call*. The time for symbolic solidarity has passed. We now ask for practical, structured, and enduring partnership. Work alongside us to ensure that Gaza's universities live on and remain a vital part of our collective future.

Signed,

Prof. Dr. Ayman Sobh
President, Al-Aqsa
University

Prof. Dr. Omar Milad
President, Al-Azhar
University – Gaza

Prof. Dr. Asad Asad
Acting President, Islamic
University of Gaza



Annual Conference Programme

9.00 Registration and Coffee

9.30 Welcome
Sandra Hamrouni, Chair, Fobzu Board of Trustees

9.45 **Session 1:** The emergency facing Palestinian Higher Education: Testimonials and Calls from Gaza Universities

Prof Kamalain Shaath (Deputy Chairman and Former President, Islamic University of Gaza), Prof Omar Melad (President, Al-Azhar University, Gaza), Prof Ayman Sobh (President, Al-Aqsa University, Gaza); Chair: Sandra Hamrouni (Fobzu).

10.45 **Session 2:** Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza

Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban (Al Azhar), Prof Nasreddin ElMezaini (Islamic University of Gaza), Dr Radwan Abu Rukba (Al-Aqsa University); Chair: Omar Shweiki (Fobzu Director).

11:30 Coffee break

11.45 **Session 3:** The emergency facing Palestinian Higher Education: The Wider Context

Dr Areen Hawari (Mada al-Carmel), Dr Samia Botmeh (Birzeit University), Osama Rishaq (Al Quds University Law Clinic), Prof Abdel Razzaq Takriti (Rice University); Chair: Prof Leon Tikly (University of Bristol).



Annual Conference Programme

13.00

Lunch

14:00

Session 4: International Support and Partnership I: Principles of Best Practice

Dr Mohamed Zughbur (Al Azhar University), Dr Chandni Desai (University of Toronto), Dr Tareq Emtaireh (Taawon), Sara Merabti Elgvin (SAIH), Prof Monica Rolfsen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology); Chair: Dr Helen Murray (KCL).

15:15

Coffee break

15:30

Session 5: International Support and Partnership II: Practical Examples and Models of Collaboration

Prof Dina Kiwan (University of Birmingham), Prof Nazmi Al Masri (Islamic University of Gaza), Dr Tanzil Chowdhury (Queen Mary University of London), Dr Basma Hajir (University of Bristol); Chair: Prof. Rachel Rosen (UCL).

4:45

Closing Plenary

Chair: Omar Shweiki, Fobzu

17:15

Dinner



Speakers

PROF OMAR MELAD

President, Al-Azhar University, Gaza

Prof. Omar Melad is the President of Al Azhar University, Gaza, appointed on September 1, 2021. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in Chemistry from the Middle East Technical University (METU), Turkey, and joined Al Azhar University as a lecturer in 1993. In 1996, he received a scholarship from the Ministry of Higher Education to pursue a Ph.D. in Polymer Chemistry, completed in 1999 at the University of Valencia, Spain. He later advanced to full professor in 2016. His administrative roles have included Head of the Chemistry Department, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Dean of Admissions and Registration, and Vice President for Academic Affairs. He has published extensively in regional and international scientific journals.

PROF AYMAN SOBH

President, Al-Aqsa University, Gaza

Prof. Ayman Sobh is President of Al-Aqsa University, Gaza, and a Full Professor of Applied Mathematics with over 30 years of academic and administrative experience. He previously served as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty of Science. He holds a Ph.D. in Fluid Mechanics from Ain Shams University (2000), an M.Sc. in Mathematical Physics (1996), and a B.Sc. in Mathematics from Zagazig University (1992). His research focuses on biofluid dynamics, heat and mass transfer, and numerical analysis. Prof. Sobh has held visiting professorships in Germany and published extensively in international journals. He is a recognized academic leader and has contributed to education reform, capacity building, and international collaboration across Palestinian higher education.

PROF KAMALAIN SHAATH

Deputy Chairman and Former President, Islamic University of Gaza

Prof. Kamalain Kamel Shaat is the Deputy Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) and President of the Hope Foundation for Education in Istanbul, Turkey. He previously served as President of IUG (2005–2015) and as a lecturer at An-Najah National University in Palestine. His professional experience includes senior engineering roles with Khatib and Alami Consulting in the UAE. Dr. Shaat holds a BSc in Civil Engineering from Cairo University, an MSc in Construction Management from Colorado State University, a PhD from the University of Leeds, and an MSc in Management Development from the European-Arab Management School in Spain. He is a committed member of Taawon and the Gaza Mental Health Program, supporting education and community development.



PROF NASREDDIN ELMEZAINI

Professor of Civil Engineering, Islamic University of Gaza

Elmezaini is a professor of civil engineering with over 40 years of academic and professional experience. He earned his B.Sc. in Civil Engineering from Mansoura University, Egypt, 1982, followed by M.Sc. from Stanford University, USA, 1985. He completed his Ph.D. at Middle East University, Turkey, 1991. Prof. Elmezaini began his career at An-Najah University, Nablus (1982–1993) before joining the Islamic University of Gaza in 1993 where he served as the founding dean of the Faculty of Engineering and was appointed Chairman of the Board of Trustees (2014–2022). He is an active member in the Emergency committee for Gaza universities; he is also a member of the steering committee of ISNAD program for supporting university students in Gaza.

DR AHMED ABU SHABAN

Dean, Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Al-Azhar University, Gaza

Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban is the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine at Al-Azhar University in Gaza and currently a Visiting Professor at York University in Canada. He is a leading figure in Palestinian higher education, instrumental in restoring academic operations in Gaza through online platforms following the 2023 war. Dr. Abu Shaban serves as the official representative of Al-Azhar University on the Emergency Committee of Gaza Universities and contributes to various international initiatives supporting higher education under siege. With a background in agricultural economics and environmental sociology, his work focuses on food security, climate resilience, and inclusive development. He has also advised UN agencies on early recovery and sustainable livelihood programming in conflict-affected areas.

DR RADWAN ABU RUKBA

Dean, International Affairs Office, Al-Aqsa University, Gaza

Dr Radwan Abu Rukba is the Dean of International Relations Affairs at Al-Aqsa University and an Assistant Professor at the Psychology Department. He is the founder of the university's academic programmes in Occupational Therapy and Nursing. Dr Abu Rukba holds a PhD in Psychology from Ain Shams University. His research focuses on two main areas: disability studies and psychological trauma. His collaborative work with a group of professors in Norway was awarded Article of the Year 2023 by the Journal of Mental Health and Prevention. He currently manages four international projects.



PROF LEON TIKLY

Professor of Education, University of Bristol

Leon Tikly is a Professor in Education at the University of Bristol. He holds the UNESCO Chair in Transforming Knowledge and Research for Just and Sustainable Futures. Leon's scholarship over many years has focused on initiatives to improve the quality of education for disadvantaged learners in Africa and the global South, as well as education policy in South Africa during apartheid and subsequently, and anti-racist education in the UK. He is currently PI on a project with FOBZU and other colleagues investigating the impact of scholasticide in Gaza. His work is underpinned by postcolonial and decolonial theoretical perspectives, as well as a commitment to social, epistemic, and environmental justice.

DR AREEN HAWARI

Director, Mada al-Carmel

Dr Areen Hawari is an academic and feminist activist with a PhD in Gender Studies. Her research explores Palestinian women's activism at the intersection of feminism, religion, and the state. She serves as the Director of Mada al-Carmel – Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa, and is an adjunct lecturer in the Israeli Studies program at the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at Birzeit University.

DR SAMIA BOTMEH

Assistant Professor of Economics, Birzeit University

Dr Samia Al-Botmeh is an assistant professor in economics at the Faculty of Business and Economics/ Birzeit University. She served as the director for the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University and the dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics. Areas of interest and publications include gender economics, labour economics, and political economy of development.

SANDRA HAMROUNI

Fobzu Chair

Sandra Hamrouni enjoyed a 30-year career with the British Council – as Country Director in Bahrain, Palestine, Cyprus and Algeria and Teaching Centre Manager in Tunisia, Syria, Oman and Spain. As Country Director in Palestine she led educational, English language, arts and cultural relations programmes throughout the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, and initiated and developed Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL) from 2009 to 2012. Now in its fourteenth year, HESPAL has enabled over 220 Palestinian academics to follow Masters and PhD programmes at UK universities. Sandra serves as Chair for Fobzu and supports several other charities.



PROF ABDEL RAZZAQ TAKRITI

Associate Professor, Rice University

Abdel Razzaq Takriti is Associate Professor of History & Arab-American Educational Foundation Chair in Arab Studies at Rice University. He has published extensively in the fields of modern Arab and Palestinian history, and has participated in establishing numerous Palestinian educational and advocacy initiatives. In 2022/2023 Prof Takriti served as the Mahmoud Darwish Visiting Chair in Palestinian Studies at Brown University. He is the co-author, with Karma Nabulsi, of the Palestinian Revolution website, which received the 2019 Middle East Studies Association of North America Undergraduate Education Award. Most recently, Prof. Takriti has been active in mobilizing against the attacks on higher education in Gaza and elsewhere in Palestine. He developed the criteria around the concept of scholasticide and he is a co-founder of Scholars Against the War on Palestine (SAWP) and the World Academic Forum on Palestine.

DR HELEN MURRAY

Lecturer in Education Policy, King's College London

Helen Murray is a lecturer in education policy and co-convenor of the Higher Education Research Group (HERG@KCL) at King's College London. Her research interests include issues of higher education, conflict and crisis in critical and historical perspectives. Before moving into academia, she worked for 12 years in policy and advocacy roles on issues of education justice with international and civil society organisations. She was Coordinator of the Right to Education Campaign at Birzeit University between 2004–2006 and a student with Birzeit's Palestine and Arabic Studies Program in 1999. Previously a trustee of Fobzu (2007–2012), she rejoined the Board in 2023.

DR CHANDNI DESAI

Assistant Professor, University of Toronto

Chandni Desai is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. She's working on a book, tentatively titled *Revolutionary Circuits of Liberation: The Radical Tradition of Palestinian Resistance Culture and Internationalism*. Her writings can be found in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *Race and Class*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, and several anthologies. She's on the national steering committee of Faculty for Palestine Canada, which focuses on the right to education, BDS in Canada, and struggles against academic freedom in higher education. She is the co-author of the *Scholars Against the War's Scholasticide* toolkit.



DR MOHAMED ZUGHBUR

Dean, Faculty of Medicine, Al Azhar University

Dr Mohammed Riyad Zughbur is a seasoned academic and internal medicine specialist with over 20 years of experience. He is the Dean of the Palestine Faculty of Medicine at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, leading medical education under extreme conditions. Holding an MD-PhD from Rostov State Medical University and a Palestinian Board in Endocrinology, he has held key roles such as Vice Dean and Director of Al-Shifa Internal Medicine Hospital. His research, published in journals like The Lancet, focuses on diabetes, endocrinology, and health care in conflict zones. He is also a national leader in medical governance and has represented Palestine internationally, advocating for resilient health systems.

DR TAREQ EMTAIREH

Director, Taawon

Dr Emtairah brings over 25 years of professional experience and leadership in international development cooperation. Prior to joining Taawon, Dr. Emtairah served as Director of the energy and climate program at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) overseeing a portfolio of economic transformation and technical assistance projects in over 52 countries. From 2012-2015, Dr. Emtairah served as the Executive Director of the pan Arab, Cairo-based, regional centre for renewable energy and energy efficiency (RCREEE), assisting governments in the region including Palestine with sustainable energy transformation.

Born in Palestine, Emtairah lived, worked, and studied in numerous countries including Jordan, Tunisia, USA, Japan, Egypt, Austria, and Sweden. He holds a BS in Materials Engineering from Rutgers University (USA) and a PhD in Industrial Environmental Economics from Lund University of Sweden.

OSAMA RISHEQ

Legal Supervisor, Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic, Al-Quds University

Osama Risheq is Legal Supervisor at Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic in Al-Quds University since 2009. Osama holds a BA degree in Public Law from Mohammad First University in Morocco, and an L.L.M in International Law with International Relations from Kent University in the UK. Osama possesses extensive fieldwork experience in international law, human rights, forcible displacement, prisoners' rights, and the right to education. He has supervised several publications by Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic, most recently "Freedom of Movement and Accessibility to Education: Case Study of Al-Quds University" and "Spot on Academic Freedom". Moreover, Osama has served as the fieldwork lead in several consultancies focusing on addressing corruption and promoting transparency, integrity and accountability, as well as human rights, including gender equality.



SARA MERABTI

The Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH)

Sara Merabti Elgvin is an advisor at SAIH, where she coordinates the Norwegian Consortium for Higher Education in Palestine (NORPAL). She has a Master's degree in Strategic Studies from Sorbonne University in Paris. Before joining SAIH, Sara worked as an advisor at the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions. With a background in political science, research, and conflict resolution, she has gained valuable field experience in North Africa, especially in Libya and Tunisia, focusing on political and humanitarian challenges.

PROF RACHEL ROSEN

Professor of Sociology, UCL Social Research Institute

Rachel Rosen is a Professor of Sociology in UCL's Social Research Institute. Her research focuses on childhood and (im)mobility in racialised border regimes. Her publications include *Bordering social reproduction: Migrant mothers and children making lives in the shadows* (co-author, MUP 2025) and *Crisis for Whom? Critical global perspectives on childhood, care, and migration* (co-editor, UCL Press 2023). She is currently co-editing *Forging Solidarities under Racial Capitalism: Connecting and Contesting Cartographies of Violence* which centres international opposition to the genocide on Palestine. She is one of the curators of the international project *Letters for Palestinian childhoods* and is a member of the BDS @ UCL staff group working in solidarity with Palestine.

PROF DINA KIWAN

Professor of Comparative Education, University of Birmingham

Professor Dina Kiwan is Professor of Comparative Education, University of Birmingham, UK. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, a council member of Research England, a member of the UK government's Migration and Advisory committee (MAC), Academic Co-Director for the £25M flagship Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Research Commissioning Centre, and is also currently the College of Social Sciences Deputy Director for Research. She has over 25 years of research, internationalisation and EDI leadership across a range of UK, US and Middle East higher education institutions, strategic UK and international policy experience, as well as applied non-governmental organisations experience. She has led a large-scale research programme, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), 'Disability Under Siege' (2020-2025) with research partners in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), addressing the challenge that most children with disabilities in conflict contexts in the Global South do not go to school. She is the author of the 2024 award-winning book, *Academic Freedom and the Transnational Production of Knowledge*, published by Cambridge University Press.



PROF NAZMI AL MASRI

Professor, Islamic University of Gaza

Professor Nazmi Al-Masri holds a PhD from the School of Education, Manchester University. He has held several senior administrative positions at the Islamic University of Gaza, including serving as the Vice President for External Relations. Collaborating with local and international NGOs, Professor Al-Masri has also established multidisciplinary partnerships with numerous European and British universities. He has also served as Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator on over 20 British and EU-funded academic projects, leading to several joint publications and conference presentations. He currently holds the status of Honorary Fellow at the University of Glasgow.

PROF MONICA ROLFSEN

Professor of Organization and Work Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

Monica Rolfsen is Pro-Rector for social responsibility and communication at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She is a professor of organization and work science, with research focused on leadership, organizational development, lean management, and the Norwegian model. Rolfsen has extensive experience in politics and civic life, and currently chairs NorPal – Norwegian consortium for Palestinian higher education.

DR TANZIL CHOWDHURY

Associate Professor of Public Law, Queen Mary University of London

Tanzil Chowdhury is a trade unionist and associate professor in public law at Queen Mary, University of London. As well as being a co-director for the Centre for Law and Society in a Global Context, he was a co-founder of the Northern Police Monitoring project and helped set up the Greater Manchester Law Centre. His writings have been published in Legal Studies, Public Law, the Journal of Law and Society and Global Constitutionalism, and he is the author of the book Time, Temporality and Legal Judgment. He has also recently co-authored the book Legal Workers Inquiry with Notes From Below.

DR BASMA HAJIR

Lecturer, School of Education, University of Bristol

Basma is a Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Bristol. Her research interests include education in conflict settings and emergencies, refugee education, education for social justice, and education and settler-colonialism. Basma's work focuses specifically on Syria and Palestine, with a particular emphasis on the higher education sector.

**“We built these universities
from tents. And from tents,
with the support of our
friends, we will rebuild them
once again.”**

**Call by Gaza Academics and Administrators
to the World, 29 May 2024**

