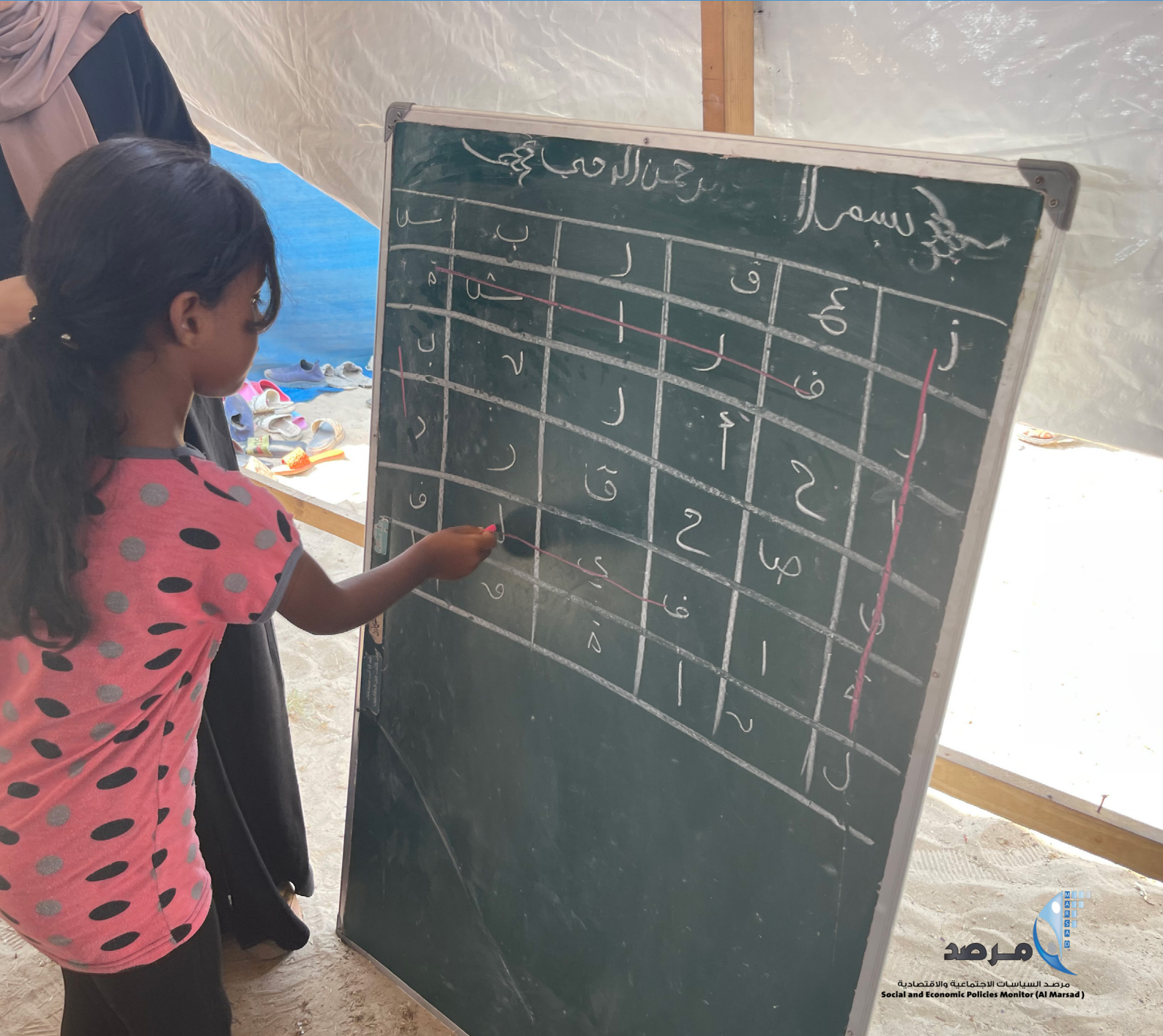


Potential Alternatives in the Education Sector Amidst Israel's Genocidal War

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This paper integrates both popular and formal education. In the context of popular education, students do not wait for the reconstruction process.

“ Since the onset of the war, the Occupation has implemented a policy of subjecting life to the power of death by targeting and destroying civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. Schools and universities are particularly targeted, aiming to achieve one of the war's goals: the annihilation of knowledge. The extent of the bombings on educational institutions suggests an undeclared objective—potentially the complete eradication of all educational facilities in the Gaza Strip. This devastation goes beyond the collapse of the educational system; it is primarily intended to drive people to emigrate from the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, international indifference to this reality allows it to become a fact on the ground. ”

A.M. Qattan Foundation and Al-Marsad

Introduction

Israel's genocidal war against all forms of life in the Gaza Strip, now entering its 10th consecutive month, has revealed the true intentions behind this brutal and unprecedented crime in contemporary history. These intentions can be summarised as systematic erasure and removal of Palestinian presence and survival in the Gaza Strip.

Achieving Israel's goal of expelling and removing the population requires creating a tragic and catastrophic reality in Gaza where survival becomes impossible. From the onset of its aggressions on the Gaza Strip, Israel has sought to implement a policy of subjecting life to the power of death by systematically destroying civilian infrastructure. To accomplish its objectives, it has engaged in what can be described as an annihilation of knowledge—an approach common to major colonial projects. This strategy helps explain why Israel has targeted educational institutions, schools, and universities, transforming them from spaces of learning into zones of destruction. These acts have become central tools in its broader genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people.

Israel has consistently employed various methods of destruction, obstruction, and fragmentation in its targeting of the Palestinian educational sector, recognizing that education is a cornerstone of Palestinian identity and existence. As a result, education has been central to its settler-colonial strategies aimed at erasing the Palestinian people, undermining their historical narrative, and subjugating those who remain, reducing them to subjects within its colonial state.

Israel placed all civilian facilities in the crosshairs of its weapons, with educational institutions being a central target of its annihilation campaign. Among civilian structures, schools and universities bore the brunt of these attacks, driven by multiple factors. Firstly, disrupting the educational process has long been a key aspect of Israeli policy. Secondly, as citizens sought refuge in schools and universities amid the displacement caused by the occupation forces during the current war of extermination, these institutions became primary targets. Israel's broader goal

of depriving Palestinians of security and safety necessitated targeting places of refuge, making schools—whether run by the government, relief agencies, or private entities—constant targets for bombing, destruction, and the forced displacement of those seeking shelter within them.

This paper examines the current state of Palestinian education in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing Israeli genocidal war and its implications for the future of Palestine. It addresses the need to protect education from further deterioration, particularly since the war began at the start of the 2023-24 academic year and continues as this paper is being prepared. As we approach the 2024-25 academic year, the conflict's negative impact on Palestinian students is expected to worsen, leading to significant educational setbacks. This situation may result in a range of educational crises, including the spread of illiteracy and increased school dropout rates, as well as long-term difficulties in learning for an entire generation exposed to this genocide. The full scope of these effects will become evident in the years following the end of the aggressions.

The paper aims to propose viable alternatives to safeguard the educational process amid this genocide and to present ideas and initiatives that could mitigate the negative impacts on the Palestinian educational sector.

Scope of Damage in the Educational Sector

Before exploring the scope of damage in the educational sector, it is important to note that all facts and quantitative data available to the researcher are subject to increase as the Israeli assault continues. Ongoing bombings and targeted attacks affect both educational facilities and human resources, including teachers, students, and academics. The data presented in this paper are accurate up to the time of its preparation.

Facts About the Scope of Damage in the Educational Sector

- Before the Israeli attack (2023-24) on the Gaza Strip, the total number of schools in the Gaza Strip was 796 schools, 554 school buildings, and 15,730 classrooms. With the outbreak of the current Israeli attack, 288 schools were converted into shelter centres, including 155 schools affiliated with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Refugees (UNRWA). The Palestinian Ministry of Education supervises 442 schools, spread across 302 school buildings, which are divided between primary and secondary schools. This indicates that 140 of these schools were operating on a double-shift system before the aggression.¹
- UNRWA oversees 284 schools, distributed across 182 school buildings. Additionally, there are 70 private schools in the Gaza Strip and 620 kindergartens across the five governorates of Gaza, with 68,392 children² enrolled. The average student density in Gaza Strip schools is

¹ General Administration of Educational Planning, Department of Statistics: "The Annual Educational Statistical Book for the Academic Year 2022-2023," Ministry of Education, Ramallah - Palestine, pp. 2-4. (Note: The above figures have been updated based on the most recent statistical data from the 2022-2023 edition.)

² Ibid., p. 13.

40 students per classroom.³

- The assault has caused a complete disruption of the educational process, resulting in the closure of 563 schools across the Gaza Strip and depriving 625,000 students of their right to education. This includes approximately 299,100 students enrolled in 307 government schools, 295,400 students in 188 UNRWA schools, and 21,000 students in private schools. Additionally, around 22,000 teachers have been unable to work, including 12,400 government teachers, 9,400 UNRWA teachers, and 1,300 private school teachers.⁴ All figures provided in this paragraph should be reviewed and potentially updated.
- 61% of government school buildings, 44% of UNRWA school buildings, and 44% of private school buildings were directly targeted or damaged. The percentage of total and partial destruction of schools by governorate is as follows:⁵

Governorate	Destruction rate
North Gaza	62.9%
Gaza	28.6%
Central Gaza	14.3%
Khan Yunis	22.9%
Rafah	17.1%

- Education Alliance statistics indicate that 386 schools were affected by the war. This includes 25 schools that were completely destroyed, 113 that were severely damaged, 125 with moderate damage, and 123 that sustained minor damage.
- The occupation has completely destroyed approximately 99 educational institutions, including schools and universities, while 334 others have suffered severe to moderate damage. Additionally, 288 schools were converted into shelter centres for displaced people, including 155 UNRWA schools that accommodated approximately 660,000 displaced persons and 133 government schools that housed 70,000 displaced persons.⁶
- In terms of human losses, the Israeli aggression resulted in the deaths of 9,211 students and injuries to 14,237 students, and the deaths of 397 teachers and injuries to 2,246 teachers.⁷

³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴ Abu Al-Qasim Al-Sheikh and Muhammad Bashir: "Report: Monitoring Israeli Violations Against Education in the Gaza Strip—Analysing Catastrophic Effects on Education and Identifying Humanitarian Recovery Needs in Palestine," 2024, Palestinian Education Coalition and Teacher Creativity Centre Association, p. 6.

⁵ Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights: "The Annihilation of Education in the Gaza Strip in the Context of Genocide," report, 2024: <https://mezan.org/ar/post/46488>.

⁶ Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights Report: *ibid.*

⁷ The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang_ar/1406/Default.aspx.

- The estimated financial cost of damage to the Palestinian educational sector in Gaza is 341 million USD, according to the provisional damage assessment conducted by the World Bank, UNRWA, and the European Union in March 2024.⁸

Education in Gaza: From Fragility to Catastrophe

The data and facts presented reveal the severe catastrophe that has profoundly impacted the Palestinian educational sector in the Gaza Strip. This crisis is compounded by the complex challenges faced by the education system in Gaza. Previous studies and reports have highlighted a reduction in school attendance and a decline in academic performance due to inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and repeated Israeli attacks. Furthermore, the Israeli blockade has exacerbated these issues by impeding the development of educational infrastructure and depriving schools of essential building materials and resources.

Schools in the Gaza Strip have long struggled with a shortage of essential educational facilities, including classrooms, science labs, computers, libraries, resources, multipurpose spaces, and playgrounds. This shortage significantly impacts the quality of education and its outcomes. Additionally, schools across the Gaza Strip face severe overcrowding, with an average of 838.7 students per classroom due to insufficient functional classrooms and school buildings. This overcrowding adversely affects the quality of education, limits teaching capacity, and hinders interactive and practical learning. Many schools also face safety and security risks due to outdated infrastructure, such as aging buildings with weak ceilings and floors, and inadequate sanitary facilities like bathrooms.⁹

The double-shift system is extensively utilised in schools across the Gaza Strip, with 58.4% of Ministry-affiliated schools and 70.1% of UNRWA schools operating on this system. This widespread use reflects the ongoing decline in international standards for school design, which require ample space for students to engage in extracurricular activities, an essential component of the educational process. This situation is further complicated by the need to construct new schools within the courtyards of existing ones.

The educational situation has not been as promising as expected; instead, it has been characterised as fragile and suffering for decades, much like other aspects of life in the Gaza Strip. The recent Israeli attack in October 2023 exacerbated this suffering, leading to a severe collapse of the educational system at all levels, from early childhood to general and higher education. This crisis places the Palestinian education sector at a critical juncture, threatening a catastrophe that could impact future generations and potentially persist for decades.

⁸ Abu Al-Qasim Al-Sheikh, *ibid*, p. 2.

⁹ Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights Report: "The Reality of Education in the Gaza Strip," 2022, a series of reports, p. 14.

According to the UNICEF report on damage to educational buildings, 70% of UNRWA schools were directly targeted or damaged, and four out of every five schools in Gaza have been bombed or damaged and need repair or rebuilding.¹⁰ The situation is further worsened by the fact that many schools have been repurposed as shelters for the displaced, increasing the number of bombing victims. Additionally, 44% (42) of private school buildings have been directly targeted or damaged. Despite these blatant violations, analysts estimate that the actual scope of the damage may be 15-20% greater than what these initial reports indicate.¹¹

Learning Loss, Dropout Rates, and Illiteracy

The annihilation of knowledge inflicted by Israel on education in the Gaza Strip has resulted in significant losses. Among the most prominent of these is the learning loss suffered by 625,000 students during the 2023-24 academic year. This loss was marked by a complete cessation of education, as schools were converted into shelters and then targeted for destruction. Furthermore, students and their families were unable to establish e-learning environments, as they did during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, due to the lack of digital infrastructure amidst repeated displacements in Gaza. This situation led to both general and specific cognitive losses in student knowledge and educational skills. As the conflict continues into the 2024-25 academic year, the accumulation of educational loss is inevitable. This could lead not only to the cessation of learning but also to the forgetting of what has already been learned, especially among younger students in early grades. This, in turn, results in low academic achievement, particularly in mastering basic knowledge and skills, diminished motivation to learn, and widespread illiteracy among children—a natural consequence of the ongoing war and targeting. The possibility of any intervention now seems impossible, given the widespread violations of personal and family security amidst displacement, as families shift their priorities from education to mere survival. In this context, children are more often found standing in water queues rather than school queues, highlighting the disastrous state of the education sector.

Illiteracy may also become widespread in Gaza due to the catastrophic conditions imposed by Israeli aggression on the education sector, which has exacerbated an already-existing crisis. This crisis stems from the cumulative educational losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the negative effects of the blockade, Israeli attacks, and the difficult humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip over the years.

The losses students have suffered so far cannot be compensated for and will significantly impact their educational attainment and personal development. This may lead to an increase in the school dropout rate, delays in academic progress, exposure to the risks of child labour and early marriage, deterioration in the understanding of children's human rights, and the erosion of students' sense of identity and belonging.¹²

10 Statement by the UNRWA Commissioner: 14 August 2024, Palestinian News and Information Agency (WAFA): <https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/101401>.

11 Abu Al-Qasim Al-Sheikh, *ibid*.

12 Kholoud Nasser, "From Spaces of Learning to Targeted Spaces: War and School Education in the Gaza Strip," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 2024: <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1655227>.

Available Solutions and Options for Returning to School

The continuation of Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip for the 10th consecutive month has resulted in the destruction of the entire educational system, leaving hundreds of thousands of students at all educational levels facing an uncertain future. The impact is not limited to the loss of the current school year; it is likely to extend into another academic year, especially given the systematic destruction of educational facilities and the conversion of schools into shelters. This situation will delay the resumption of studies after the conflict ends and place additional strain on an already-damaged educational infrastructure, making it difficult to envision or implement a plan to restore the educational process in Gaza. Addressing this crisis will require extensive efforts and collaboration from all parties, as well as the development of creative and innovative solutions.

Currently, all available alternative solutions and options appear unattainable or insufficient to address the security realities imposed by the Israeli war, the lack of protection, and the absence of personal security for students and teachers. These conditions severely limit the ability to propose viable solutions to the crisis.

Community Attempts to Solve the Crisis

Many Palestinian civil society organizations have initiated voluntary educational efforts led by young volunteers in both formal and informal shelter centres across Gaza. These initiatives are inspired by the concept of popular education, which Palestinian society adopted during the 1987 Intifada, and involve forming educational committees in all neighbourhoods and displacement centres. The focus is on providing psychological and social support to children in these locations. This idea could be further developed to inspire popular education in core subjects by leveraging the resources of civil society organisations to reach all displaced centres and communities. In coordination with the Ministry of Education, such efforts could help address the educational loss. This could be achieved by setting up educational tents in every shelter centre, allocating teachers, and meeting basic educational needs to reintegrate students into the learning process.

Possibilities for the Success or Failure of the UNRWA Educational Initiative

The UNRWA recently launched an initiative to resume education, first in UNRWA schools that serve as shelter centres, with further expansion into formal and informal displacement centres.

The initiative aims to restore regular education in UNRWA schools for students residing in those displacement centres. It involves intensive education in four core subjects—Arabic, mathematics, science, and English—over two months, in addition to offering psychological and social support sessions to students. During the morning hours, the classrooms will be cleared of displaced individuals, who will return in the evening. In this way, UNRWA will maintain the continuity of education while also providing security for the displaced. The program will then be extended to displaced communities outside of UNRWA schools at a later stage.

I believe the UNRWA initiative is highly ambitious, but it will face many obstacles, the most significant being the ongoing Israeli attacks on the agency's displacement centres, particularly schools. Additionally, there may be resistance from some displaced individuals to vacate classrooms to facilitate teaching. However, despite these challenges, it is crucial to support the initiative. It directly challenges the Occupation's oppressive policies that aim at exacerbating illiteracy and offers an opportunity to make up for the educational losses experienced during the past school year. This could be the groundwork for finishing the current academic year and preventing further educational setbacks for Gaza's children.

This ambitious initiative could also present an opportunity for other entities, such as the Ministry of Education and private civil-society organizations working in the educational field, to replicate the experience in both formal and informal shelter centres, aiming for comprehensive access to education for all students across the Gaza Strip.

Urgent Options for Restoring Education in the Gaza Strip

Restoring education in the Gaza Strip requires strategic planning to overcome the specific obstacles and challenges posed by the Israeli war. This highlights the need for ideas on how to open and operate learning spaces that support both children and teachers in returning to regular schooling. A gradual transition using a scaffolding approach¹³ may be the solution, helping to avoid confusion for both students and teachers. This approach would involve implementing urgent short-term mechanisms to ensure access to education alongside long-term strategies to rebuild an effective educational system.

Suggested Solutions:

Solution One: Emergency Interventions During the Aggression

This solution focusses on actions taken during the aggression phase and does not require waiting for the end of the Israeli assault. It involves setting up temporary educational tents in all areas of displacement, both formal and informal, as well as in government, private, and UNRWA schools. The emphasis is on providing emergency psychological and social support during the aggression, including enhancing social-emotional learning skills for children and families. The response should be tailored to available resources and activities to alleviate psychological impacts during the conflict. Basic educational courses should cover four subjects—Arabic, mathematics, English, and general sciences—presented in an intensive and sequential manner to ensure students acquire fundamental knowledge, with potential for expansion later. Coordination between the Ministry of Education, civil society organizations, and UNRWA's Education Department can facilitate the arrival of specialists and experts in psychological and social support to all displacement locations.

¹³ The scaffolding approach in education is a teacher-directed process that involves breaking down large tasks into smaller, more manageable steps and using a structured framework or tool to complete them. How an assignment is divided depends on the class composition, the teacher's goals, and the desired outcomes for the students. These outcomes may align with the school or department's curriculum frameworks and educational objectives or be tailored to the specific needs of the students. Although the goals for each task may differ, consistency in the process is crucial. Utilizing a repetitive framework or tool—such as a graphic organiser, outline, self-edited reference, or title score—helps build each task upon the previous one. This approach facilitates a smooth transition to more complex tasks while promoting greater student independence. For more information, see <https://www.storyboardthat.com/ar/articles/e/%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9>.

Solution Two: Structured Reinforcement to Address Educational Gaps

This solution can be implemented immediately after the war ends. It aims to ensure that students and teachers can safely access learning environments, such as schools that are vacated by displaced persons, or newly organised educational sites in open areas. The primary goal is to address the educational losses from the past academic year by focussing on the four core subjects. The curriculum would be intensified over a period of two to three months to make up for student educational deficits and include final exams to advance students to the next academic stage. This approach aims to recover the academic year 2023-24 and prepare for the 2024-25 academic year, with a focus on reinforcing basic subjects during this period.

Additionally, this proposal must consider addressing the psychological trauma experienced by students, especially those injured by the Israeli assault. Treating psychological trauma is essential for combating illiteracy, compensating for educational losses, and supporting the students' return to school.

Solution Three: Distance Education

This solution also relies on ending the war and improving the digital infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. Given the difficulty faced by the Ministry of Education and UNRWA in clearing schools of displaced individuals who have lost their homes, remote learning has become a viable option. This involves developing educational programs and interventions to reintegrate students into the learning environment. These programs include implementing emergency education systems, accelerated learning, and educational preparation.

Additionally, the A.M. Qattan Foundation (AMQF) and the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (al-Marsad) have launched an initiative titled "Education Without Schools." This initiative, in partnership with Gazan activists working with limited resources to create educational alternatives, presents a range of solutions and recommendations, including:

- Strengthening individual efforts to resume education in the Gaza Strip by utilizing any available buildings for education as an emergency response.
- Reforming and expanding shift work, establishing educational camps for children, recruiting as many volunteer teachers as possible, and developing a comprehensive e-learning system, including for those with disabilities.
- Establishing a fund to support and strengthen these initiatives, aiming to mitigate the losses and difficulties faced by students, families, schools, and educational staff. Additionally, civil society organizations must advocate for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, a process that will be lengthy and subject to political conditions.

Conclusion

Resuming education no longer depends on waiting for the end of the war or the day after. Instead, immediate efforts must focus on protecting the educational system from collapsing amidst the ongoing conflict. This challenge is crucial for all Palestinians. Addressing the war's impact on education requires a unified effort from both official and unofficial sectors to effectively confront this issue.

Rebuilding the education system that has been completely destroyed requires donor countries to support governmental, non-governmental, and international institutions working in the education sector, as well as to resume funding for the UNRWA. The Ministry of Education, along with representatives from countries, institutions, and international organizations within the educational sector, must intensify efforts to develop and implement urgent humanitarian and educational response strategies, as well as long-term responses in coordination with other relevant sectors to ensure integrated efforts. It is also essential for national and international institutions to intensify their efforts to monitor, document, and address violations against the educational process and to take serious measures to implement pressure and advocacy campaigns to protect education.

We must recognise that we do not have the luxury of choosing between different alternative solutions; saving education is a major task and must take precedence over all other issues left in the wake of the Israeli assault. This goal can only be achieved through unified and integrated efforts, with coordination amongst all parties at both the local and international levels, to help the education sector recover from the severe blows it has suffered during this war. The Palestinian private sector also bears significant responsibility for investing in and advancing the education sector, especially as Palestinian capital must play a crucial role in enabling the education sector to recover from the shocks and direct impacts it has endured and continues to endure during the ongoing, destructive Israeli war. The Palestinian government, represented by the Ministry of Education, can further support this recovery by providing incentives and facilities to Palestinian investors in the education sector, empowering them to play a key role in restoring the Palestinian education system.

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