

Graveyards Under Fire

Special Report

**Regarding the Violation of the Sanctity of Graves and the Deceased
during the Aggression since October 7, 2023**

Prepared by

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Introduction:

The Israeli occupation continues to violate religious sanctities, international, and humanitarian laws through its repeated attacks on cemeteries in the Gaza Strip. Not even the dead have been spared from the occupation's brutality; cemeteries have been targeted for destruction, graves desecrated, and corpses stolen, in scenes that reflect the most heinous forms of crime. This report documents the committed crimes, presenting evidence and testimonies, while highlighting the legal responsibilities and urgent demands directed to the international community.

Executive Summary:

Forty cemeteries out of sixty in the Gaza Strip were attacked during the Al-Aqsa Flood war (2023-2024), of which 21 cemeteries were completely destroyed and 19 partially damaged. The occupation forces carried out mass grave excavations, during which the bodies of martyrs and the deceased were stolen, and military sites were established atop the destroyed cemeteries. These acts constitute a grave violation of international humanitarian law and amount to war crimes.

Key Violations:

- Deir al-Balah Archaeological Cemetery: Completely destroyed despite its historical significance dating back to the Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE).
- Byzantine Cemetery: Completely destroyed.
- Ibn Marwan Cemetery and Al-Tuffah Neighborhood Cemetery: 1,100 graves desecrated and 150 bodies stolen.
- Christian Baptist Church Cemetery: Direct shelling led to the death of civilians.
- Commonwealth Cemetery (English Cemetery): Damaged due to military operations despite its historical symbolism.

- Sheikh Radwan Cemetery: Destruction of graves belonging to prominent national leaders and figures.
- Al-Batsh Cemetery: Bulldozing of a modern mass grave and denial of families' right to visit their loved ones.

Legal Responsibility:

- Cemeteries are considered “civilian objects” protected under the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols.
- The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) stipulates that deliberate attacks on cemeteries, grave desecration, and theft of corpses constitute war crimes.
- International humanitarian law prohibits the desecration of the dead and the violation of the sanctity of cemeteries.

Findings:

1. The Israeli occupation's systematic violation of the sanctity of the dead and religious sanctities.
2. The commission of crimes involving the destruction of civilian objects and assaults on human heritage.
3. The use of cemeteries for military purposes, contradicting the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.
4. The entrenchment of patterns of cultural genocide and geographic cleansing of the Palestinian people.

Recommendations:

1. An urgent international investigation by the International Criminal Court into the crimes of desecration and destruction of cemeteries.

2. Immediate international sanctions imposed on Israeli military leaders and officials involved.
3. Deployment of independent fact-finding missions under the supervision of the United Nations to document these crimes.
4. Obliging Israel to restore damaged cemeteries and compensate the victims' families.
5. Launching an international media campaign titled "Not Even the Dead Are Safe" to expose these violations to global public opinion.
6. Protection of Palestinian cemeteries as human heritage requiring special safeguarding by the international community.

Conclusion:

Human dignity does not end with death. Protecting cemeteries and preserving the memory of the deceased are integral parts of safeguarding human dignity as a whole. The international community must assume its responsibilities regarding these crimes and not allow the continued violation of humanitarian and legal values in Palestine.

Together, so that the dead will not be victims again.

Review of Evidence and Testimonies Regarding Cemeteries Bulldozed and Destroyed by the Israeli Occupation:

Deir al-Balah Archaeological Cemetery:

One of the most prominent historical sites in the Gaza Strip, located on the coast of Deir al-Balah city. This cemetery dates back to the Late Bronze Age (circa 1550–1200 BCE) and is considered among the most important archaeological discoveries in Palestine.

The cemetery is notable for its large collection of anthropoid clay coffins, which are among the largest found in the region. These coffins resemble Egyptian Pharaonic coffins and were found inside graves carved into kurkar (calcareous sandstone) rock or red clay, oriented toward the sea.

During the previous Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip, Moshe Dayan conducted an illegal excavation campaign at the site, seizing many artifacts which he added to his private collection. After his death, his heirs sold these artifacts to Israeli institutions.

Unfortunately, the cemetery suffered extensive destruction during the Israeli war on Gaza in 2023, resulting in the loss of a significant portion of this important cultural heritage.

These events underscore the critical importance of protecting archaeological sites and preserving cultural heritage.

Ibn Marwan Cemetery:

Ibn Marwan Cemetery, also known as Ali Ibn Marwan Cemetery, is located in the Shuja'iya neighborhood east of Gaza City and is considered one of the oldest Islamic cemeteries in the city.

Adjacent to the cemetery is the Ali Ibn Marwan Mosque, dating back to the late 12th century CE, attributed to Sheikh Ali Ibn Marwan, a prominent figure in Islamic mysticism of Andalusian origin who settled in Gaza and died in 1314 CE. The cemetery contains grave markers from various historical periods, including the Ottoman era during the 19th century, making it an important source for studying Gaza's social and cultural history.

On October 27, 2023, Israeli occupation forces targeted Ibn Marwan Cemetery in the Shuja'iya neighborhood, resulting in the destruction of graves and scattering of bones and remains, constituting a blatant violation of the sanctity of the dead. The Ali Ibn Marwan Mosque also sustained severe damage during the Israeli aggression on Gaza, which began on October 7, 2023, and continued through the date of this report, leading to the destruction of over 100 archaeological and historical sites across the Strip.

On February 16, 2025, families from the Shuja'iya neighborhood erected tents on the grounds of Ibn Marwan Cemetery following the massive destruction inflicted on their homes by the Israeli aggression, reflecting the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster endured by Gaza's residents.

Al-Tuffah Cemetery:

On January 5, 2024, Israeli occupation forces committed a horrific crime at Al-Tuffah Cemetery, one of the largest and most prominent Islamic cemeteries in Gaza City, also known as the "Martyrs Cemetery." Occupation machinery bulldozed the cemetery and exhumed approximately 1,100 graves, exposing bodies and violating their dignity without any respect for the sanctity of the dead, with remains scattered along the roadside.

According to the Government Media Office in Gaza, the occupation army stole around 150 recently buried martyrs' bodies and transferred them to an unknown location, raising suspicions of possible involvement in organ theft.

The office also indicated that the occupation repeated this crime multiple times, previously handing over 80 bodies of martyrs stolen from Gaza and North Gaza governorates, tampered with, returned disfigured, and buried in Rafah.

This crime constitutes a flagrant violation of all divine values and laws, as well as international norms and customs, and adds to the series of crimes committed by the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

The Christian Baptist Cemetery:

The Baptist Church Cemetery in Gaza City is one of the most prominent religious landmarks of the Protestant Christian community in the Strip. The cemetery is located within the Baptist Church complex, which has a distinct historical and spiritual character and is used for burying members of the community.

During the Israeli aggression on Gaza in October 2023, the complex, including the cemetery, suffered severe damage from direct shelling, resulting in the martyrdom of several civilians who sought shelter there.

In the context of the Israeli war on Gaza, many religious and historical sites, including churches and cemeteries, were targeted, causing widespread destruction of religious and cultural infrastructure in the area.

These attacks constitute a blatant violation of international humanitarian law, which prohibits targeting places of worship and religious sites during armed conflicts. Numerous international bodies have condemned this targeting, considering it a war crime warranting accountability.

Targeting cemeteries and religious sites in Gaza goes beyond physical damage, extending to psychological and moral impacts on the local community, as these sites are an integral part of the cultural and religious identity of the Palestinian people.

Under these circumstances, the international community is called upon to take immediate measures to protect religious and cultural sites in Gaza and ensure that such violations are not repeated in the future.

Commonwealth War Cemetery (“The English Cemetery”):

During World War I and thereafter, Britain sought to honor its fallen soldiers by burying them near the battlefields where they fought, establishing, through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (formerly the Imperial War Graves Commission), an extensive network of military cemeteries. Palestine, then under Ottoman

control followed by the British Mandate, witnessed many battles and thus hosts numerous such cemeteries. One of the most notable is locally known as the English Cemetery in Gaza City.

The Commonwealth Cemetery is located in the Al-Tuffah neighborhood along Salah al-Din Street in northern Gaza. It was officially inaugurated on April 28, 1925, in a ceremony reflecting Britain's political and military symbolism at the time. The cemetery contains approximately 3,691 graves, the majority of which belong to British soldiers (3,082), along with soldiers from other Allied countries: 263 Australians, 23 New Zealanders, 23 Canadians, and 50 Indians of various religions (Hindus and Muslims). Additionally, 36 Polish soldiers are buried there, along with smaller numbers from South Africa, Greece, Egypt, France, Germany, and Yugoslavia. Notably, 184 Ottoman (Turkish) soldiers are also interred within the same grounds.

This cemetery was more than just a burial site; over time, it has become a witness to one of the most violent phases the region has endured. The surrounding area experienced widespread destruction, with wrecked vehicles and damaged roads scattered nearby. Nevertheless, the cemetery remains relatively well-preserved, maintaining the precise architectural layout characteristic of Commonwealth cemeteries, with graves arranged in orderly rows separated by grass and plants.

The cemetery reflects religious diversity, including Christian majority graves alongside Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu soldiers, symbolizing the multicultural composition of the British Empire's forces during that era. This diversity lends the cemetery additional cultural significance as a symbol of the global coalition that fought in those wars.

Despite political upheavals and repeated wars in Gaza, this cemetery stands as one of the most important historical landmarks related to World War I in Palestine and the broader Middle East. It is occasionally visited by diplomats and representatives of Commonwealth countries to commemorate those who lost their lives in major conflicts that changed history.

The cemetery also suffered targeting and bulldozing during the 2023 war on Gaza, reflecting the impact of the Israeli aggression on cultural and historical landmarks.

Byzantine Cemetery:

The Byzantine Cemetery is located east of Jabalia town in the northern Gaza Strip and is considered one of the most prominent archaeological sites reflecting the ancient history of the area during the Roman and Byzantine periods. It was discovered in 1998 and contains hundreds of graves dating back to the 2nd century AD, making it one of the oldest Christian historical landmarks in Palestine. These graves demonstrate traditional Christian burial methods and serve as evidence of the Christian presence in the region during those eras.

During the Gaza war between 2023 and 2024, the Byzantine Cemetery was subjected to destruction as a result of Israeli bombardment. This shelling caused damage to parts of the cemetery, including some graves and historical mosaics that adorned the site. This destruction is part of a series of attacks targeting numerous archaeological and cultural sites in the Gaza Strip during the war, resulting in the devastation of invaluable historical landmarks and depriving future generations of a part of their history and cultural identity.

Khan Younis Cemetery:

Khan Younis Cemetery is located in one of the largest cities in the Gaza Strip and is considered one of the main cemeteries used for burying martyrs and victims who fall during repeated attacks on the city. During the ongoing Israeli aggression, the cemetery witnessed tragic developments.

In November 2023, the Ministry of Health in Gaza announced the burial of the bodies of 111 martyrs from Gaza and northern Gaza Strip residents in a mass grave west of Khan Younis, after the occupation forces had detained their bodies inside Gaza hospitals. Following the withdrawal of Israeli military forces from the vicinity

of Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis city in the southern Gaza Strip, the extent of destruction caused by the army was revealed, including partial destruction of the cemetery and the exhumation of several graves. Previously, the cemetery had been subjected to intensive shelling by Israeli artillery and warplanes, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of graves.

Tunisian Cemetery (Al-Shuja'iya Cemetery):

The Tunisian Cemetery, also known as the Tunisian Graveyard, is located in the Al-Shuja'iya neighborhood east of Gaza City and is one of the oldest Islamic cemeteries in the Gaza Strip. This cemetery holds significant historical and cultural value, as it is believed that Tunisian soldiers were part of the Ottoman forces that participated in defending Gaza during the 18th century Hijri calendar, with some buried in this cemetery, which led to its naming as the Tunisian Cemetery in their honor.

During the Israeli war on Gaza that began on October 7, 2023, the Tunisian Cemetery sustained severe damage as a result of repeated Israeli assaults on the Al-Shuja'iya neighborhood. The shelling caused partial destruction of the cemetery, leading to the desecration of graves and the dislodging of human remains. In February 2025, amid the widespread destruction in Al-Shuja'iya, some displaced Palestinian families were forced to erect tents atop the cemetery's ruins after their homes were destroyed, turning the cemetery into a shelter for the displaced.

The Tunisian Cemetery exemplifies the violations committed against heritage and religious sites in Gaza during the war.

Beit Hanoun Cemetery:

In December 2023, Israeli occupation forces stormed Beit Hanoun Cemetery, one of the oldest cemeteries in the northern Gaza Strip, located approximately two kilometers from the Beit Hanoun (Erez) border crossing with Israel. The cemetery covers an area

estimated at about 20 square meters and is a historic site containing the remains of martyrs and deceased residents of the area.

The Israeli forces completely bulldozed the cemetery using heavy military machinery, resulting in the destruction of graves and the mixing of human remains, making it difficult to identify any of them. It was also reported that the Israeli army exhumed specific graves and removed the bodies of recently buried martyrs, looting them in a blatant violation of the sanctity of the dead.

Austrian Neighborhood Cemetery:

On January 17, 2024, Israeli occupation forces committed a blatant violation of the sanctity of the dead by bulldozing and destroying the Austrian Neighborhood Cemetery located west of Khan Younis city in the southern Gaza Strip, near the Jordanian Field Hospital and Nasser Medical Complex.

The occupation forces used military bulldozers to destroy graves and crush tombstones, in addition to exhuming several graves and stealing bodies, an act that provoked widespread outrage among local residents.

Israel justified this action by alleging the existence of "intelligence information" indicating the possible presence of Israeli prisoner remains in the cemetery, claiming the operation aimed to retrieve their remains. However, these claims lack credibility, especially given the recurrence of such violations in other cemeteries throughout the Gaza Strip.

These actions constitute a grave breach of international humanitarian law, which prohibits the desecration of cemeteries and the mistreatment of human remains, adding to a long record of crimes that require international accountability and prosecution.

Al-Faluja Cemetery:

Al-Faluja Cemetery is located in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza Strip, and is considered one of the oldest cemeteries in the area. It contains the graves of many Palestinian refugees displaced from their original villages who settled in the camp, in addition to hundreds of martyrs and prominent figures from the local community.

In December 2023, the cemetery was subjected to violations by the Israeli occupation forces during their military operations in northern Gaza Strip. The Israeli army advanced with its vehicles inside the cemetery, resulting in the destruction and desecration of a number of graves. Reports also emerged of the theft of some bodies. This violation provoked widespread anger among the camp residents, who regard the cemetery as a symbol of their dignity and historical memory.

Martyrs Cemetery – Beit Lahia:

The Martyrs Cemetery in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip, is one of the most prominent burial sites in the area. Due to the high pressure on other cemeteries, it has become one of the few available places for burial, increasing its importance during the war.

On November 3, 2023, Israeli occupation forces targeted the Beit Lahia Cemetery, resulting in the killing of ten graveyard workers while performing their humanitarian duties. This attack drew widespread condemnation and was denounced by human rights entities as a blatant violation of international humanitarian law. Satellite images and videos circulated on social media showed extensive destruction in the cemetery, including damaged graves and clear land excavation. Eyewitnesses reported that the cemetery was shelled and excavated, leading to the destruction of many graves.

This incident exemplifies the violations suffered by civilians and civilian infrastructure in Gaza, necessitating an international investigation and accountability of those responsible.

Sheikh Radwan Cemetery:

Sheikh Radwan Cemetery, also known as the “desert cemetery,” is one of the oldest and largest cemeteries in Gaza City, located in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood northwest of the city center. Established during the late Ottoman period around World War I, it is named after the first person buried there, Sheikh Radwan. The cemetery contains the graves of many prominent Palestinian and national figures.

During the 2023 genocide war, Sheikh Radwan Cemetery suffered severe attacks and damage by the Israeli army, which used parts of the cemetery as military positions. Heavy machinery leveled large areas to convert them into launch points, resulting in the destruction of tombstones and the trampling of bodies.

Bani Suheila Cemetery, East Khan Yunis:

Bani Suheila Cemetery, also known as the “Martyrs Cemetery,” is located in Bani Suheila town east of Khan Yunis city, southern Gaza Strip. It is one of the most important cemeteries in the region with significant historical and national value.

During the Israeli aggression on Gaza, the cemetery was subjected to grave violations. Occupation forces excavated graves and destroyed tombstones, causing many martyrs’ remains to disappear. Local residents reported that they could no longer locate their loved ones’ graves following these violations. Satellite images revealed deliberate and gradual excavation of the cemetery, with Israeli military fortifications established there for at least two weeks from late December 2023 to early January 2024.

Saint Porphyrius Church Cemetery:

Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church is located in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City. It is the oldest church in the city and the third oldest in the world, founded in the 5th century AD. The church is named after Saint Porphyrius, Bishop of Gaza, who died in 420 AD and was buried in the northeastern corner of the church.

It is also known as the “Church of the Cemetery” due to the historic Christian cemetery surrounding it, containing tombstones dating from 1872 to 1912, serving as an important record of Christian families in Gaza during the Ottoman era.

In October 2023, the church was subjected to an Israeli aerial bombardment causing severe damage to one of its buildings, killing at least 18 people, including children, who had sought shelter in the church. The church’s agents’ building, which housed several Palestinian families, both Christian and Muslim, also sustained heavy damage.

These attacks constitute a blatant violation of international humanitarian law prohibiting the targeting of places of worship and religious sites. The Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem condemned the bombing, describing it as a “war crime.”

Saint Porphyrius Church and its surrounding cemetery are prominent historical and religious landmarks in Gaza, symbolizing the religious and cultural coexistence in the city. The cemetery also represents a significant record of the Arab Christian heritage in the region during the Ottoman period.

Targeting the church and cemetery poses a threat to Gaza’s cultural and religious heritage and underscores the urgent need to protect religious and historical sites in Palestine and ensure respect for international humanitarian law.

Al-Batsh Cemetery:

Al-Batsh Cemetery is located in the Shujaiya neighborhood in eastern Gaza City and was established on October 22, 2023, during the Israeli aggression on Gaza. It was designated for burying unidentified martyrs whose bodies accumulated in Al-Shifa Medical Complex. As the aggression escalated, the cemetery became a refuge for burying many martyrs due to difficulties in accessing main cemeteries.

It is one of the most prominent mass cemeteries created during the aggression, holding between 500 and 1000 bodies, reflecting the scale of the tragedy experienced by Gaza’s population.

In January 2024, the cemetery was attacked by Israeli occupation forces. Military machinery bulldozed the site, leading to

exhumation, destruction, dismemberment, and theft of some bodies, including grave markers used to identify the deceased. Ms. Noor Nasser, a Gaza resident displaced to southern Gaza, stated that her brother, the martyr “Mohammed” in his twenties, was buried in Al-Batsh Cemetery in a fragmented state. Later, the family was shocked to find that the cemetery was bulldozed with no remains of her brother left. She added: “The Israeli army did not just kill my brother, but went so far as to deprive the family of merely visiting his grave.”

Sheikh Ajlin Cemetery:

Sheikh Ajlin Cemetery is located in the Sheikh Ajlin neighborhood southwest of Gaza City, a historic area known for its calm coastal nature and agriculture of figs and grapes. It occupies a high location near the coastal road.

During the Israeli aggression on Gaza, the cemetery suffered severe violations by occupation forces. Satellite images and videos showed bulldozing of the cemetery using heavy machinery and tanks, destroying tombstones and trampling bodies, violating the sanctity of the dead.

Targeting Sheikh Ajlin Cemetery threatens Gaza’s cultural and religious heritage and emphasizes the urgent need to protect Palestine’s religious and historical sites and ensure respect for international humanitarian law.

Sheikh Shaaban Cemetery:

In December 2023, Israeli occupation forces committed a flagrant violation against Sheikh Shaaban Cemetery, one of the oldest Islamic cemeteries in Gaza City, located in the Al-Saha area in Zeitoun neighborhood, near the Baptist Hospital. Between December 17 and 20, occupation machinery bulldozed the cemetery, destroying graves, exhuming bodies, abusing and trampling them with tanks, leaving human remains exposed in blatant violation of the sanctity of the dead and religious sanctities.

New Al-Bureij Cemetery:

In a flagrant violation of the sanctity of the dead and religious sites, Israeli occupation forces bulldozed the New Al-Bureij Cemetery located in the southern part of Al-Bureij refugee camp, Central Governorate, Gaza Strip. This cemetery, established on an area of 13.5 dunams under the supervision of the Central Awqaf Directorate, serves as a replacement for the old Al-Bureij Martyrs Cemetery, which had long been filled and serves approximately 45,000 camp residents.

During military operations in the Gaza Strip, occupation vehicles passed through the cemetery, destroying graves and exhuming bodies, leaving them exposed along the road. The American network CNN documented these violations, showing armored Israeli personnel carriers passing directly through the cemetery, with video footage showing graves on both sides of the recently bulldozed dirt road.

The bulldozing of New Al-Bureij Cemetery is a painful testimony to the scale of the humanitarian tragedy experienced by Gaza's population, where even burial sites were not spared from violations, reflecting the occupation's disregard for human values and international conventions.







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