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## **CULTURAL HERITAGE IN GAZA DAMAGED AND IN GREAT DANGER**

The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) deplores the loss of human lives and the destruction that has recently taken place in the Palestinian Territories and the State of Israel, in particular in the Gaza area, and the ongoing armed conflict that threatens to disrupt a fragile ceasefire. It is also extremely concerned by the threat that the present conflict could escalate still further.

ICBS, founded in 1996 'to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters', now calls on all parties to be respectful of the cultural property in the region. In making this statement, ICBS takes no position on any other issue relating to conflicts in the region.

There have been reports that two municipal libraries in Amoghazi and in Juhur-el-Deek were completely destroyed and that the libraries of the Islamic University and the Tal el-Hawa branch of the al-Aqsa University were severely damaged. Sadly we have to assume that civil records have been destroyed in the violence of the recent period.

In 1998, ten museums were registered in Gaza and on the West Bank, while this number was reduced to five in 2002, and the number of visitors had decreased dramatically. In August 2008 the first archaeological museum in Gaza was opened, privately funded and with support of the Geneva *Musée d'art et d'histoire*.

This private antiquities museum run by Gazan collector Jawdat Khoudary, has now been damaged. Furthermore, preliminary reports, still to be verified, of damage to cultural heritage sites, including excavated archaeological sites, are cause for alarm. .

Gaza is one of the richest crossroads of cultural history in the region, with many archaeological sites and historic buildings. The whole region has an exceptionally complex and rich cultural heritage and it is of greatest importance that all parties in the conflict take whatever precautions necessary to avoid destruction and damage to cultural heritage. The city of Gaza is thousands of years old and has been inhabited by all the important cultures in the region - Canaanite, Hebrew and/or Jewish, Greek-roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Crusader, Egyptian, Ottoman - leaving behind archaeological sites that are a dominating factor in the region. There are also many ancient mosques, churches, synagogues, a market hall, a caravanserai, the port of Anthidon, the end of the Incense route, as well as modern heritage which is also of great importance. Khan Younis is known for its well-preserved caravanserai. Rafah, Abasan al-Kabeera, Deir al-Balah and Ralia are ancient cities. The majority of destroyed buildings constitute the vernacular heritage that reflects the history of the daily life of ordinary people.



The clearing and rebuilding process that takes place as a result of armed conflict can often be hazardous. Interventions may take place without properly recording the damages to cultural heritage. Sufficient qualified staff required for such a task is often not available, etc. When the civil administration collapses cultural heritage, such as archaeological sites, is in great danger of being looted.

While ICBS is keenly aware that there are other compelling concerns at times of armed conflict, not least the loss of human life, it wishes to stress that international humanitarian law also protects cultural property. It urges all parties concerned to be mindful of their responsibilities to respect the provisions of *The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, and its two Protocols, which calls on countries 'not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage' in the territory of other countries.

ICBS therefore calls on all parties to take the greatest possible care to protect the rich cultural heritage of the region, to refrain from using cultural property for military purposes or to shield military objectives and to take the necessary preventive measures to ensure that it is not damaged in any way during the present conflict.

Culture should be considered as a basic need and supported by International Organisations and Governments.

Gaza needs its cultural heritage to strengthen its identity and unity.

On behalf of the Blue Shield Organization,

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President  
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**For more information please contact the Blue Shield Office**

The Blue Shield is the protective emblem of the *1954 Hague Convention* which is the basic international treaty formulating rules to protect cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The Blue Shield network consists of organizations dealing with museums, archives, audiovisual supports, libraries, as well as monuments and sites.

The International Committee of the Blue Shield, founded in 1996, comprises representatives of the five Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in this field:

- the International Council on Archives ([www.ica.org](http://www.ica.org)),
- the International Council of Museums ([www.icom.museum](http://www.icom.museum)),
- the International Council on Monuments and Sites ([www.icomos.org](http://www.icomos.org)), and
- the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions ([www.ifla.org](http://www.ifla.org))
- the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations ([www.ccaaa.org](http://www.ccaaa.org))

National Blue Shield Committees have been founded in a number of countries. *The Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS)*, recently founded in December 2008, will coordinate and strengthen international efforts to protect cultural property at risk of destruction in armed conflicts or natural disasters. The ANCBS has its headquarters in The Hague.

Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS)

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