



Current events in Palestine and Israel

The Blue Shield¹ responds to the unfolding events in Palestine and Israel with enormous sadness and sympathy. We hope that an immediate, peaceful, solution to the current appalling loss of life and associated humanitarian crisis can be found. In this spirit, we implore all parties to do everything in their power to ensure that the conflict does not escalate or spread further. In particular, given our role and mission, we also ask all parties to the conflict to do all in their power to protect the cultural heritage of Gaza, Israel, and beyond.

While the protection of human life and dignity must always be the first priority in any crisis, protecting people and protecting their cultural heritage are indelibly intertwined. Heritage gives people and communities a sense of place, belonging, and identity; a reason for living that supports wellbeing and dignity. It can be the first building block of reconciliation. It can, sadly, also be a reason for, and weapon and target in, conflict.

We welcome that both Israel and Palestine are parties to the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the Convention's First (1954) Protocol. We further welcome that Palestine has ratified the Convention's Second (1999) Protocol and we urge Israel to do the same as soon as possible. Under customary international law, all parties in a conflict must recognise that civilians, and civilian objects (which includes their cultural property), are also protected, and must be respected.

Gaza has a very rich archaeological and historical heritage going back to prehistoric times with significant Roman and later remains. The Blue Shield is aware that there are, as yet officially unverified, media reports of significant damage to heritage sites across the area, such as the destruction of the mosque of Jabalia and significant damage to the historic centre of Gaza, where there are reports of damage to several sites including the Church of Saint Porphyrius, the oldest Christian Church in Gaza, built in the 1150s, where hundreds of Christians and Muslims had sought sanctuary. We understand there were many casualties when the Church came under attack.

Those who adhere to international humanitarian law, and other relevant, international instruments, declarations, and resolutions, acknowledge that damage to cultural sites belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all humankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world. Under international law, all parties to conflict are expected to: commit to taking all feasible actions to safeguard and respect cultural property located in areas where armed conflict is taking place; avoid using cultural property and its immediate surroundings as part of their military operations in a way that may cause or lead to damage and destruction; avoid targeting cultural property unless there is military necessity; prevent looting; avoid reprisals directed at cultural property; and protect and support those involved in the protection of cultural heritage.

We ask all involved to acknowledge their responsibilities to protect the civilian populations caught in the midst of this fighting and to ensure that they will have a heritage on which to build reconciliation and a common future.

The Blue Shield stands ready to assist, as possible, anyone involved in the conflict to protect heritage, and to provide any assistance possible towards a resolution.

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¹ The Blue Shield is the independent, impartial, neutral, and not-for-profit international NGO dedicated to the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict and following disaster, see <https://theblueshield.org/>