



## Institute for Palestine Studies

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**This column by the Institute's Senior Fellow, Nadia Hijab, was syndicated on 8 January 2009 by [Agence Global](#). The opinions in this piece are her own.**



### A Music School Silenced in Gaza

By Nadia Hijab

There was a music school in Gaza. It was just six months old. The 31 children aged seven to 11 could choose one of five instruments, including the guitar, oud (lute), and piano. Most of the 19 girls gravitated to the guitar and piano while many of the 12 boys showed a preference for the oud.

The school worked out of rented premises in the Palestinian Red Crescent Society building just across the street from the Preventive Security Forces compound in Gaza City. The compound was targeted in the first wave of Israeli bombardments on December 27, and twice more the next day. The five-story building was vaporized; a flat gravel surface is all that remains.

Like other buildings in the neighborhood, the Gaza Music School was shattered; window frames and doors were blown out, and holes were punched in the walls. The force of the blast imploded the four ouds, just like it had the compound.

By some miracle, the children had not yet arrived for their lessons and so were spared the fate of those in other schools in the path of Israeli bombs.

In the midst of all the death and destruction in Gaza, the school's short life rouses particular emotion. That there was such a school at all is astonishing, not just because of the 18 month siege that followed the decades of "de-development" of Gaza under Israeli occupation but also because one might expect it to be contrary to an Islamist social program.

There is almost no musical education in Gaza. The school project was developed in response to community demand, particularly from among the 11,600 children who are members of the Qattan Center for the Child. The Center provides extra-curricular activities and a library for the children. It is impressive: With its 103,000 books, it is one of the largest children's libraries in the Arab world.

The children who attended the Center's music workshops and concerts started asking for more. "They said, 'We want to play instruments too,'" explained Ziad Khalaf, the Ramallah-based director of the Qattan Foundation, which established the school with co-funding from the Swedish development organization SIDA.

The school provided a window on another world for the besieged Gazans. "Many parents sat in on the theory lessons so they could better support their kids' homework," said Khalaf.

The five music teachers include two Russian women married to Palestinian men. They refused to leave Gaza when the border was briefly opened to enable foreigners to flee. For them, Gaza with all its misery and deprivation is still home, just as it is for the 1.5 million other Palestinians living there.

And what about Hamas' supposed social rigidity? Some websites did take a strong line against musical education, complaining that Hamas was allowing music to be taught under its rule instead of the Sharia. But they were ignored. Khalaf emphasizes that the Foundation has experienced full support from all authorities and communities in its different places of operation.

The day after the music school was hit, its coordinator called each of the children and their parents to make sure they were safe, and also to assure them that the school would be repaired, restocked, and reopened as soon as possible.

In Ramallah, the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music is planning a fundraiser soon to help rebuild the school. "Some friends from Amsterdam and London who saw the damage to Gaza music school on the Foundation's website said they will be fundraising to help," Khalaf said.

These plans, too, arouse emotion: Palestinians rebuild even as the rubble rises around them. They have had 60 years to learn how to do so, and show no signs of giving up their quest for their rights -- not even the right to learn how to play a musical instrument.

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