

Hamas says Gaza mosque destroyed, urges UNESCO to save heritage

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The Great Omari Mosque, the largest and oldest in Gaza City, reduced to rubble [Doaa Rouqa/Reuters]

Gaza City, December 9 (RHC)-- Hamas has said that Israel bombed Gaza's medieval Omari Mosque, causing widespread destruction to the landmark site, and urged UNESCO to protect historic buildings in the besieged Palestinian territory.

Footage and images posted on social media by the Palestinian group on Friday appeared to show the Great Omari Mosque, the largest and oldest in Gaza City, reduced to rubble. Only the minaret appeared to be intact, with the surroundings shattered. The site has been a Christian or Muslim holy site since at least the fifth century.

"The crime of targeting and destroying archaeological sites should spur the world and UNESCO into action to preserve this great civilisational and cultural heritage," Gaza's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities said. It estimated that 104 mosques have been razed since the start of the Israeli assault on Gaza on October 7th.

Palestinians in Gaza have expressed outrage after seeing the images. "I have been praying there and playing around it all through my childhood," 45-year-old Ahmed Nemer told the news service Reuters, accusing Israel of "trying to wipe out our memories." The tailor, who lived on the street next to the Omari Mosque, was speaking from southern Gaza, where he fled to seek shelter from the bombardment.

Mohammad Rajab, a taxi driver from Gaza City who has also fled to the south from his home a few hundred metres from the mosque, said it was the city's most important landmark. "This is barbaric," he said.

The Othman bin Qashqar Mosque, also in Gaza City, was hit by air raids on Thursday, Hamas said. It also condemned the destruction of the Hammam al-Samara, the last Turkish-style bath in the territory, where Gaza Palestinians had bathed for more than 1,000 years.

The Palestinian group, which has governed the Gaza Strip since 2007, said three churches had also been destroyed, including the 1,000-year-old Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius, the oldest still active in the territory.

Israel's assault on Gaza has killed more than 17,000 Palestinians, according to health authorities in the besieged enclave, and has laid waste to entire city districts including much civilian infrastructure.

The NGO Heritage for Peace counted 195 architectural heritage sites in Gaza. In a recent survey, the group found 104 sites had been partially damaged by the continuing conflict.

Gaza's architectural heritage had already suffered during previous wars between Israel and Hamas. Israel has repeatedly accused Hamas of using mosques, schools and other civilian infrastructure to shield its fighters.

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