



Between Fatigue and Fear: West Bank Student Solidarity During the Gaza War

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Abstract

This study analyzes why university students in the West Bank appeared to show minimal public and collective engagement during the Gaza war. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 62 students from six Palestinian universities, the research indicates that young people's responses were shaped by intersecting emotional, structural, and political factors. While students expressed deep moral and identity-based solidarity with the people of Gaza—mainly through online expression—they also described feelings of exhaustion, fear, and political disillusionment that limited their capacities for organized action. Many reported self-censorship, caution, and selective forms of engagement such as digital advocacy, boycotts, and humanitarian donations. These patterns reflect the tensions among enduring empathy and the constraints imposed by repression, surveillance, and factional division. The study offers insight into how Palestinian youth navigate activism and resistance under occupation, and how their emotional and political fatigue may reshape the future of student mobilization in the occupied territories.

Despite the unprecedented destruction, mass displacement, and humanitarian catastrophe since the beginning of Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, student activism in the West Bank remained subdued.¹ During the bombardment, campuses that once symbolized political energy

¹Tony Rantissi, Vered Gitis, Zhiyuan Zong, and Nathan Hankins, "Transforming the Water-Energy Nexus in Gaza: A Systems Approach," *Global Challenges* 8, no. 5 (2024): 2300304, <https://doi.org/10.1002/GCH2.202300304>; Shuo Holail et al.,

witnessed few demonstrations, limited solidarity events, and minimal organizational coordination. Expressions of support were largely confined to social media platforms and symbolic gestures rather than collective mobilization. These patterns suggest a major shift in the political behavior of Palestinian youth. Why did university students respond so cautiously to the Gaza war?

Historically, Palestinian student movements were vital engines of political and national mobilization. From the 1920s through the post-Nakba period, students played leading roles in shaping national consciousness, founding organizations, and articulating visions of liberation.² The Palestinian General Union of Students, founded in 1959, and other campus-based bodies became critical representatives of Palestinian identity in exile, and they influenced the formation of key political groups like Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.³ During the 1970s and 1980s, universities such as Birzeit functioned as spaces for political contestation, described as the “lifeblood” of their parent movements.⁴ The Israeli occupation recognized this influence and restricted political activity, detained student leaders, and disrupted university operations.⁵

This began to shift following the Oslo Accords in 1993. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority restructured the political landscape, introducing administrative control over universities and weakening the autonomy of student movements.⁶ The incorporation of student blocs into factions aligned with the authority blurred the boundaries between activism and political patronage, leading to generational disillusionment and declining trust in formal organizations.⁷ The 2007 schism between Fatah and Hamas further fragmented youth activism, resulting in heightened surveillance, campus repression, and internal polarization.⁸ These developments replaced a once-vibrant tradition of student mobilization with a risk aversion that yielded fragmented and individualized expressions of dissent.

“Time-Series Satellite Remote Sensing Reveals Gradually Increasing War Damage in the Gaza Strip,” *National Science Review* 11, no. 9 (2024): nwaec304, <https://doi.org/10.1093/nsr/nwae304>.

² Hasan Ubeid, “Muqāwamat al-Taḥyīd: al-Ḥarakat al-Ṭalabīyah fī al-Ḍiffah al-Gharbiyah [Resistance to Neutralization: The Student Movement in the West Bank],” *Al Jazeera*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/3/13/مقاومة-التحيد-الحركة-الطلابية-في>.

³ *Ibid.*; Shadi W. Shehadeh, “Researching the General Union of Palestine Students from the Diaspora,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2023, https://escholarship.org/content/qt9hm9h33z/qt9hm9h33z_noSplash_9a9bbf4fae5bd4a944649d41ce8730bd.pdf?t=rv7mgx.

⁴ Jeroen Gunning and Morten Valbjørn, “Grasping Arab Islamist Responses to the War on Gaza,” *Mediterranean Politics* 30, no. 2 (2025): 384–395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2439688>; Ubeid, “Resistance to Neutralization.”

⁵ Ibrahim S.I. Rabaia and Lourdes Habash, “The Hidden War on Higher Education: Unmasking the ‘Educide’ in Gaza,” POMEPS, n.d., <https://pomeps.org/the-hidden-war-on-higher-education-unmasking-the-educide-in-gaza>; Right2Edu, “Reclaiming Political Space: The Global Resonance of the Student Intifada,” July 27, 2024, <https://right2edu.birzeit.edu/reclaiming-political-space-the-global-resonance-of-the-student-intifada>.

⁶ Tarik Mokadi and Ahmad Yousef, “Beyond the Occupation: Palestinian Youth and the Struggle for Political Change,” *An-Najah University Journal for Research—B (Humanities)* 38, no. 11 (2024): 2189–2228, <https://doi.org/10.35552/0247.38.11.2291>.

⁷ Ubeid, “Resistance to Neutralization.”

⁸ Alaa Tartir, “Criminalizing Resistance: The Cases of Balata and Jenin Refugee Camps,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2017), <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/212121>.

In recent years, digital platforms have emerged as alternative arenas for engagement. Social media enables Palestinians to document violations, express solidarity, and circumvent restrictions on public assembly.⁹ Campaigns such as #SaveSheikhJarrah and the TikTok Intifada are central examples of online collective action.¹⁰ However, under conditions of occupation and authoritarian surveillance, digital participation often substitutes for, rather than expands, physical mobilization.¹¹ Students remain cautious in translating online engagement into public action, fearing punishment, arrest, or factional reprisal.¹² Consequently, while digital resistance sustains emotional connection, it reflects the structural and psychological limitations of activism under repression.

Research indicates that Arab students in Israeli universities and the West Bank have faced surveillance, threats, and institutional pressures that limited collective action.¹³ Before and especially during the Gaza war, universities deployed policing, surveillance, and institutional targeting against students and educators engaged in Palestinian solidarity.¹⁴ Although isolated incidents of activism have occurred—such as Palestinian students disrupting EU diplomats' meetings and throwing stones in protest against the Israeli military campaign—overall campus mobilization has been limited.¹⁵

This study investigates the weak and fragmented mobilization of West Bank university students during the Gaza war. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 62 students from six universities, it examines how political repression, struggle fatigue, and the growing reliance on digital forms of expression shaped patterns of cautious engagement and disengagement.¹⁶ The study shows how these immediate and lived constraints reconfigured the meanings of solidarity and resistance for Palestinian youth. Situating student responses within broader discussions

⁹ Helga Tawil-Sour and Miriyam Aouragh, "Intifada 3.0? Cyber Colonialism and Palestinian Resistance," *The Arab Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (2014): 102–133; Tamara Kharroub, "Systematic Digital Repression: Social Media Censoring of Palestinian Voices," Arab Center Washington DC, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/systematic-digital-repression-social-media-censoring-of-palestinian-voices>; Bilal Hamamra and Rebecca Ruth Gould, "Free Speech and Democracy in Palestinian Universities: A Call for Parrhesiastic Speech," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 56, no. 13 (2024): 1317–1331, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2024.2391857>.

¹⁰ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Oqab Jabali, Bilal Hamamra, and Munther Saeedi, "Impact of Using Social Media on Facilitating Grassroots Mobilization and Activism Among Palestinians: A Qualitative Study," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2025.2557109>.

¹¹ Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Areej Tatour and Lana Tatour, "The Criminalization and Racialization of Palestinian Resistance to Settler Colonialism," in *The Routledge International Handbook on Decolonizing Justice*, ed. Chris Cunneen et al. (London: Routledge, 2023), 91–102, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176619-11>.

¹² Khaled Abu Toameh, "PA Resumes Crackdown on Social Media Users, Political Rivals," *Jerusalem Post*, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/pa-resumes-crackdown-on-social-media-users-political-rivals-669546>.

¹³ Tal Hager, Mohammad Khalaile, and Yousef T. Jabareen, "The Role of Academic Institutions in a State of War: The Gaza–Israel Conflict," *Higher Education* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01590-1>.

¹⁴ Mohammad Wind, "The Role of Universities in Israeli Apartheid and Genocide, and the Movement for a Free Palestine," *Voices in Urban Education* 53, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.35240/vue.165>.

¹⁵ Reuters, "Palestinians Throw Stones at EU Diplomats' Car in West Bank Protest over War," April 30, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinians-throw-stones-eu-diplomats-car-west-bank-protest-over-war-2024-04-30>.

¹⁶ Munther Saeedi, Oqab Jabali, and Fakhre Khalili, "Reclaiming Identity: The Gaza War's Role in Shaping Palestinian University Students' Resilience and Life's Meaning," *Acta Psychologica* 259 (September 2025): 105312, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105312>.

of activism under prolonged occupation, the article documents shifts in participation strategies rather than the wholesale retreat of students from political commitment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rather than treating weak mobilization as an absence of activism, the framework conceptualizes student responses to the Gaza war as a reconfiguration of political engagement under structural and emotional constraints. It seeks to explain why Palestinian university students in the West Bank exhibited limited visible mobilization despite a strong tradition of student activism, while forms of political commitment persisted in less confrontational ways. The framework integrates structural, organizational, cognitive, and adaptive dimensions to account for changing patterns of youth engagement in highly constrained environments.

Political opportunity theory provides a lens to understand how political and institutional contexts shape the forms of activism.¹⁷ Social movements are more likely to thrive when institutional openness, leadership unity, and organizational capacity exist. In the West Bank, political opportunities have been sharply limited due to authoritarian controls exercised by the Palestinian Authority, Israeli military surveillance, campus-level restrictions, and factional fragmentation within student organizations. The weakening of student unions and political blocs has reduced the capacity to coordinate and sustain activism, creating an environment in which overt protest carries significant personal and political risks. Such closure of political opportunity structures does not eliminate activism but constrains the feasibility of traditional collective action.

Perceived efficacy theory helps explain how students' beliefs about the effectiveness of collective action shape their willingness to protest.¹⁸ Many Palestinians perceive that solidarity efforts are unlikely to influence decision makers or alter conditions in Gaza, producing a sense of futility that discourages high-risk engagement. This is intensified by political repression, the threat of sanctions, and psychological stress, including burnout linked to constant digital exposure.¹⁹ Together, low perceived efficacy and high repression constrain overt activism.

Emotional fatigue theory complements this perspective by highlighting how prolonged exposure to violence, repression, and repeated political setbacks generates exhaustion and selective withdrawal from confrontational activism.²⁰ Such fatigue does not signal apathy or political disengagement; instead, it reflects an adaptive response to sustained high-risk conditions.

¹⁷ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

¹⁸ Albert Bandura, *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997); Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹⁹ Oqab Jabali, Munther Saeedi, Heba Sleem, and Yousef Alawneh, “Unraveling the Impact of Virtual Social Comparisons on Psychological Burnout among An-Najah National University Students: A Mixed Method Study,” Research Square, December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-3801864/v1>.

²⁰ James M. Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 3 (1998): 397–424; Klandermans, *Social Psychology*.

Everyday resistance theory provides a framework for understanding how activism persists under repression through less visible and less confrontational practices.²¹ When mass mobilization becomes too dangerous or ineffective, students may redirect their political engagement into symbolic, digital, or individualized forms of resistance, including online advocacy, informational sharing, and community-based support. These practices demonstrate that reduced participation in street protests does not imply diminished moral commitment but rather a strategic adaptation to restrictive political environments.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the muted mobilization observed among West Bank university students during the Gaza war reflects not political neutrality but a transformation in the repertoire of contention. Structural repression, organizational fragmentation, low perceived efficacy, and emotional fatigue have narrowed the space for overt activism while simultaneously encouraging less visible forms of political engagement. Student activism, therefore, has been reconfigured by the altered political opportunity structures.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the perceptions of Palestinian university students. The central aim was to examine how identity, resilience, structural barriers, and digital practices intersect to shape patterns of their engagement and disengagement. Semi-structured interviews created the primary evidence, enabling an exploration of psychosocial dynamics, political attitudes, and digital activism within the contexts of settler colonialism, authoritarian governance, and prolonged conflict.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 62 students ages 18–25 from six Palestinian universities: An-Najah National University, Arab American University in Jenin, Birzeit University, Al-Quds (Abu Dies) University, Hebron University, and Palestine Technical University—Kadoorie (Table A1). The final sample was diverse in gender, academic year, field of study, and place of residence, offering a rich basis for comparison.

Participants' involvement in solidarity activities—defined as actions supporting Gaza during the war, including attending rallies, making financial contributions, sharing content on social media, or volunteering for campaigns—varied across the sample. Students coded as “Yes” reported consistent engagement in such activities; “Sometimes” suggested intermittent or limited engagement; “No” indicated no reported participation. This variation offers insight into the structural, psychological, and contextual factors shaping student participation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to balance flexibility with focused inquiry. An interview guide comprising open-ended questions was developed to explore students' political attitudes, perceptions of mobilization, experiences with institutional and social constraints, and practices of online activism. The format allowed participants to use their own words while enabling the interviewer to probe emerging themes. Each interview lasted approximately 20–40 minutes and was conducted in Arabic, either in person or remotely depending on logistical and security considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

²¹ Stephanie Dornschneider, “Exit, Voice, Loyalty . . . or Deliberate Obstruction? Non-Collective Everyday Resistance under Oppression,” *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 1 (2023): 126–141, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720004818>; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, several measures were taken. The interview guide was reviewed to avoid leading or suggestive questions, neutral language was employed throughout, and the scope of questions was balanced to prevent participant fatigue. Standardized prompts ensured consistency across interviews while leaving room for individual expression. These steps sought to minimize bias and strengthen the authenticity of the narratives collected.

Ethical safeguards were prioritized.²² Participants were informed in advance about the potential for distress when discussing war-related experiences or political repression.²³ They were reminded of their right to decline any question or withdraw at any point without consequence. Interviews were carried out by two social workers, a journalist, and media and communications specialist, all of whom were trained in supportive engagement and prioritized participants' emotional well-being. Breaks were offered when needed, and information about psychosocial support resources was provided to participants who experienced distress.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions in students' narratives (Table A2). The process involved repeated reading of transcripts, systematic coding, grouping of codes into themes, and iterative refinement to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.²⁴ To enhance reliability, coding was cross-checked by both researchers, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. While formal intercoder agreement was not calculated, these procedures ensured consistency and rigor in theme development.

Themes were defined and supported with illustrative quotes, highlighting how structural barriers, authoritarian constraints, psychosocial pressures, and digital practices shaped patterns of mobilization. The analysis also shed light on enabling factors, such as identity affirmation, resilience strategies, and new forms of digital activism, providing a nuanced understanding of the evolving role of Palestinian youth during the Gaza war. Minor variations in response totals across tables are due to occasional non-responses.

Closed-ended survey items used predefined response categories, while open-ended responses were thematically coded and subsequently grouped into analytically meaningful categories based on recurring patterns in participants' explanations; no Likert-scale cut-points were applied.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON GAZA WAR ACTIVISM

Survey and interview data indicate that students were highly informed, with 50 percent following the news daily and most others several times a week (Table 1). Social media was the primary source of information for nearly the entire sample, and just under half accessed Palestinian news channels, a mix of new media and traditional sources. A third-year male student at Birzeit

²² Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the university where one of the researchers works. The study involved minimal risk activities, specifically structured interviews with participants. The approval covered all aspects of participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

²³ All participants provided informed consent after being fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants also consented to the publication of anonymized quotes and data excerpts, with assurances that their identities would remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms.

²⁴ The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

TABLE 1 Students' news habits and perceptions of the Gaza war (N=62)

Question	Response	N	%
1. How often do you follow news or updates about Gaza?	Daily	31	50
	Several times a week	27	43.5
	Rarely	3	4.8
	Never	1	1.6
2. How would you describe the current situation in Gaza?	Genocide	58	93.5
	War	3	4.8
	Limited aggression	0	0
	Unsure	1	1.6
3. What are your main sources of information about events in Gaza?	Social media platforms	61	98.4
	Palestinian news channels	29	46.8
	International media outlets	12	19.4
	Friends or family members	22	35.5
	None	0	0
4. How do you assess the role and performance of the armed resistance in Gaza?	Honorable and effective	46	74.2
	Reckless and ill-considered	4	6.5
	Has little impact	1	1.6
	No opinion	11	17.7

remarked, “Even if I try not to follow it, I see it everywhere on social media—it’s impossible to ignore.”

Students’ high levels of awareness and emotional engagement—and the fact that 93.5 percent saw the war as a genocide—are not matched by participation in protests or other forms of political action (Table 2). To understand the gap, the article first examines students’ patterns of involvement and non-involvement. It then explores key factors shaping engagement—including structural, institutional, psychological, and political constraints—as well as media exposure and cultural awareness. Illustrative quotes from interviews provide nuances regarding students’ motivations, perceptions of risk, and decision-making processes.

Mobilization and Participation

Just over 50 percent of respondents expressed a desire to participate in Gaza solidarity activities, while nearly half reported non-participation (Table 2). The interviews suggest that this was often shaped by hesitation, fear, and practical constraints rather than lack of interest. The most common forms of engagement, among 33–40 percent of students, were boycott campaigns and financial donations. Direct participation in rallies or marches was limited, with only 11 percent participating in such open expressions of solidarity.

The 48.4 percent of Palestinian students who did not want to participate in solidarity activities indicated situational hesitation linked to safety concerns, uncertainty, or competing obligations. “I want to help, but I don’t always know how to act safely or effectively,” said a third-year female student from Birzeit University. Expressing more general constraints, a first-year male from

TABLE 2 Readiness for Gaza solidarity activities (N = 62)

Question	Response	N	%
1. Do you want to participate in solidarity activities for Gaza? Please explain your reasons.	Yes	32	51.6
	No	30	48.4
	Depends on circumstances	0	0
2. What forms of support do you prefer, and why?	Financial donations	21	33.9
	Writing and digital publishing	8	12.9
	Participation in rallies and marches	7	11.3
	Boycott campaigns	25	40.3
3. What factors currently prevent you from participating in solidarity efforts?	Fear of repression	21	33.9
	Not convinced of effectiveness	5	8.1
	Lack of motivation	8	12.9
	Busy with life and studies	28	45.2
4. What would encourage or enable you to participate in the future?	Clear university support	14	22.6
	Organized leadership or movement	23	37.1
	Safe environment	17	27.4
	Awareness and media campaigns	7	11.3

An-Najah told the interviewers, “I care deeply about Gaza, but I have classes and work—sometimes it feels impossible to join anything.”

Those who expressed the desire to participate gravitated toward safer modes. Boycott campaigns were most common, at 40.3 percent, followed by financial donations, digital publishing, and participation in rallies. “Boycotts are something I can do safely from home,” noted a second-year female at the Arab American University. “I feel like I’m contributing without risking arrest.” A 22-year-old male from Hebron University added: “Donating or supporting online campaigns feels meaningful, even if I can’t march in the streets.”

Practical barriers were seen to affect mobilization. The most common was being busy with studies and daily responsibilities, with repression the primary factor for only about a third of the sample. These constraints were often felt in combination. One fourth-year female from Al-Quds University reflected, “Even if I want to join a demonstration, I worry about Palestinian Authority surveillance or my grades suffering.” Much smaller percentages cited lack of motivation or doubts about the effectiveness of actions.

Students also highlighted factors that could encourage participation in the future. Organized leadership or clear student movements were the most cited. Respondents also stressed the safety of the protest environment and direct university support. A third-year female from Birzeit University emphasized, “Knowing it’s safe and coordinated would make me feel confident joining solidarity actions.” A first-year male from Palestine Technical University added, “If there were clear student groups leading initiatives safely, more of us would participate.” Awareness and media campaigns were less commonly mentioned.

These findings indicate that Palestinian university students’ selective and cautious mobilization reflects calculated decisions shaped by perceptions of risk, practical constraints, and the effectiveness of available forms of engagement. Emotional commitment and awareness are high, but structural and institutional factors, combined with personal limitations, determine how, when, and whether students act.

TABLE 3 Student perceptions of the political and social environment (N = 62)

Question	Response	N	%
1. How would you describe the student environment at your university in terms of encouraging solidarity with Gaza?	Strongly supportive	7	11.3
	Moderately supportive	24	38.7
	Weakly supportive	21	33.9
	Absent / not supportive	10	16.1
2. How do Palestinian security forces influence or limit participation in solidarity activities?	Strongly limit participation	7	11.3
	Moderately limit participation	24	38.7
	Weakly limit participation	21	33.9
	No influence	10	16.1
3. In what ways does fear of Palestinian Authority suppression affect your participation in events or demonstrations?	Limits participation	36	58.1
	No effect	26	41.9
4. How do Palestinian factions inside the university contribute to—or hinder—solidarity efforts?	Definitely contribute	6	9.7
	Contribute to some extent	21	33.9
	Do not contribute	29	46.8
	Weaken solidarity efforts	6	9.7
5. Has coordination with security institutions impacted your ability to engage with solidarity events?	A lot	19	30.6
	A little	14	22.6
	No effect	14	22.6
	I don't know	15	24.2

Structural and Institutional Constraints

The interviews reveal how a range of constraints manifested in daily life. “Our university doesn’t organize anything meaningful for Gaza,” a fourth-year female student from Palestine Technical University said. “We are on our own.” A 21-year-old male from Hebron University noted, “Even student committees are careful; the PA keeps an eye on everything.” The data in Table 3 break down a range of these factors.

According to the respondents, university environments provided only moderate encouragement for solidarity, with only 7 percent reporting that administrations were strongly supportive, while 50 percent said there was weak or no support (Table 3). A third-year female from Birzeit University observed, “There’s no real encouragement here; we hear about Gaza in lectures, but nothing is organized to support it.” A first-year male at An-Najah University agreed: “Most students care privately, but the university itself does very little to help us act collectively.”

Nearly half of the respondents reported that fear of security forces further limited participation. “We know security is watching,” lamented a fourth-year female from Al-Quds University. “Some students are afraid to join even small events.” The survey also found that concerns about suppression by the Palestinian Authority affected a majority of students. As one 20-year-old male from Hebron University reflected, “Even when we want to protest or organize, we think twice because of the PA. It’s not just Israel we worry about.”

In addition, constraints were experienced at the student level, with nearly half of respondents reporting that factions were not contributing to efforts against the Gaza war; nearly 10 percent believed that factions were actively weakening solidarity efforts. “Factions argue among

TABLE 4 Psychological motivations and personal attitudes (N = 62)

Question	Response	N	%
1. How do you feel when you hear about the situation in Gaza?	Distressed/helpless	62	100
	Not distressed	0	0
	Sometimes distressed	0	0
2. Do you believe your own actions or participation can make a difference?	Yes	25	40.3
	No	18	29
	Not sure	19	30.6
3. How do concerns about safety, arrest, or persecution affect your willingness to participate in solidarity activities?	Greatly limit my participation	23	37.1
	Somewhat limit my participation	24	38.7
	Do not affect my participation	15	24.2
4. Do you feel that engaging in solidarity work could impact your professional or academic future?	Yes, it could have negative consequences	24	38.7
	No, it would not affect my future	18	29
	Maybe/uncertain	20	32.3
5. Have you experienced political exhaustion, frustration, or emotional fatigue related to these issues?	Yes	52	83.9
	No	10	16.1
	Sometimes	0	0

themselves,” observed a second-year female from the Arab American University. “Their disputes distract from actual support for Gaza.” Coordination with security institutions further restricted engagement, with 30.6 percent reporting a major impact. A first-year male from Palestine Technical University noted, “Sometimes events are canceled or monitored too closely, so it feels safer to stay home and help in other ways.”

Psychological and Emotional Factors

Students reported high emotional engagement but also political fatigue. All indicated feelings of distress or helplessness regarding Gaza, and 83.9 percent reported experiencing political exhaustion or emotional fatigue (Table 4). “I check the news every morning,” a first-year female student from An-Najah University stated. “I feel like I cannot disconnect from what is happening in Gaza.”

Perceived personal efficacy was mixed: More than 40 percent believed their actions could make a difference, but the remaining respondents were divided roughly evenly between feeling powerless or being uncertain. “Sometimes I feel my donations or posts online don’t change anything,” a first-year female student said. “It’s frustrating.” By contrast, a third-year male sounded a more hopeful note: “Even small actions matter. I try to help where I can—it’s not much, but it feels necessary.”

Concerns about law enforcement and safety also shaped the psychology of participation. More than one-third of students indicated that fears of arrest or persecution greatly limited their involvement, while a similar number reported that these issues limited their activity somewhat. A 22-year-old female from Al-Quds University said, “I want to join demonstrations, but I can’t risk getting detained; it could ruin my future.” Nearly 40 percent of respondents expressed similar concerns about academic or professional consequences.

More than 80 percent of students said they experienced frustration or fatigue due to continuous exposure to violence and political stagnation. “After months of following constant destruction, I

TABLE 5 Student perceptions of media and cultural awareness regarding Gaza

Question	Option	N	%
1. Do you perceive a cultural or emotional gap between Gaza and the West Bank?	Yes, a noticeable gap	39	62.9
	No	10	16.1
	To some extent	13	21
2. How effective do you think cultural and media support for Gaza has been?	Effective	55	88.7
	Not effective	3	4.8
	Partially effective	4	6.5
3. Does official Palestinian media fulfill its role in motivating solidarity?	Yes	27	43.5
	No	14	22.6
	Partially fulfills its role	21	33.9
4. How has social media influenced your awareness of events in Gaza?	Very high influence	46	74.2
	Moderate influence	13	21
	Low influence	2	3.2
	No influence	1	1.6

feel drained,” a second-year male from the Arab American University expressed. “It’s hard to stay active.” These findings demonstrate that while students possess high awareness and moral concern, psychological and emotional pressures significantly shaped how, when, and whether they engaged in solidarity activities.

Media Exposure and Cultural Awareness

The results in Table 5 indicate that most students perceived a cultural or emotional gap between Gaza and the West Bank. Indeed, more than 62 percent expressed a sense of disconnection despite shared national identity. “Even though Gaza is part of us, being here in the West Bank makes it feel far—sometimes like it’s happening to someone else,” a 21-year-old female student from An-Najah National University reflected. For his part, a male third-year student from Birzeit University noted, “We feel solidarity, but daily life here is different; we can’t experience what they go through, and that creates distance.”

Despite this perceived divergence, cultural and media support for Gaza was overwhelmingly seen as effective, with 88.7 percent of students acknowledging its role in maintaining awareness. Social media, in particular, exerted a strong influence, with 74.2 percent reporting a very high impact on their engagement. “I learn more from social media than from TV. Videos, posts, and live updates make the suffering real,” one 22-year-old female student from Al-Quds University explained. Another student added, “Social media connects us directly. Even if we are far, it gives us a way to feel part of the struggle.”

However, attitudes toward official Palestinian media were mixed. Only 43.5 percent considered it fully effective in bolstering solidarity. “Sometimes I see the news on TV and it doesn’t move me,” a male student from Palestine Technical University offered. “The real stories are on Instagram or TikTok, shared by people on the ground.” A fourth-year female from Hebron University added, “The official channels give information, but it feels scripted or incomplete. Social media feels more honest.” These findings illustrate that while students maintained strong moral and national connections to Gaza, structural, geographic, and media-related factors shaped the

intensity and forms of their engagement, blending emotional investment with mediated and selective participation.

CONCLUSION

This survey of 62 Palestinian students in West Bank universities reveals high levels of awareness and moral engagement. However, these factors interacted with structural constraints, psychological fatigue, and digital mediation to produce reluctance among many young people to publicly oppose Israel's war. These findings reflect both continuity and transformation in Palestinian student activism.

The interviews corroborate political opportunity theory. Administrative control by universities and the Palestinian Authority, Israeli surveillance, and factional fragmentation significantly constrained students' ability to organize collective action.²⁵ These findings agree with prior research highlighting the weakening of student unions and political blocs after the Oslo Accords and after the split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in 2007, which reduced organizational capacity and heightened the perceived personal risks of activism.²⁶

In addition to structural issues, the findings identified individual-level mechanisms that affected how students interpreted and responded to the constraints. Questions about the potential effectiveness of their actions, as well as exhaustion and frustration, were critical to this process. These findings were in line with perceived efficacy theory and emotional fatigue theory.²⁷

However, while prior studies emphasize institutional and factional constraints as primary inhibitors, this article suggests that students navigated these limitations through low-risk strategies—indicating that they were not simply passive but adaptive. For instance, some students demonstrated selective efficacy, participating in online campaigns and boycotts, as well as making financial donations. This finding partially diverges from traditional accounts of disengagement, showing that high moral consciousness can coexist with adaptive, low-risk forms of action. This is consistent with everyday resistance theory.²⁸ Thus, structural constraints have not neutralized activism or forced students to retreat from political commitments; instead, they strategically altered their forms of resistance.

For these Palestinian students, digital engagement substituted for, rather than merely complemented, physical mobilization under conditions of repression. This sustained awareness, emotional connection, and low-risk forms of participation, preventing complete disengagement. In this sense, digital activism enables solidarity even as it displaces higher-risk collective action. Crucially, although internet activism does not expand mobilization, it reconfigures engagement into safer, mediated forms. Social media emerged as the primary avenue for awareness and solidarity, consistent with studies of Palestinian digital activism.²⁹ Nearly all participants relied on social

²⁵ Mokadi and Yousef, "Beyond the Occupation"; Tartir, "Politics of Palestinian Development Aid."

²⁶ Ubied, "Decolonial Struggles"; Tartir, "Politics of Palestinian Development Aid."

²⁷ Ubied, "Decolonial Struggles"; Saeedi et al., "Reclaiming Identity."

²⁸ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Dornschneider, "Exit, Voice, Loyalty."

²⁹ Tawil-Sour and Aouragh, "Intifada 3.0"; Kharroub, "Systematic Digital Repression"; Hamamra and Gould, "Free Speech."

media for information, and about three quarters rated its influence as very high. The findings thus partially diverge from historical accounts of student apathy during repressive periods.³⁰

Still, the findings of this study provide nuances regarding claims that digital activism fully substitutes for physical mobilization. While online engagement sustained emotional and moral solidarity, structural and psychological barriers—including fear of arrest, factional disputes, and academic pressures—continued to limit tangible collective action. Students were neither entirely passive nor fully mobilized; rather, their engagement was mediated, strategic, and constrained by both context and personal risk assessment.

This study aligns with global patterns of activism under repression, where safety concerns, collective trauma, and institutional norms mediate engagement. Evidence from the United States illustrates that even in comparatively permissive contexts, student activism is complex and strategic. Chenoweth et al. (2024) documented nearly 12,400 pro-Palestine protests in 2023–2024, largely nonviolent and motivated by both humanitarian outrage and dissatisfaction with US policy.³¹ Within American universities, faculty and students organized boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaigns, occupations, and encampments despite institutional pushback and legal threats. This created new transnational networks of solidarity that extended to Gaza and challenged militarized, neoliberal educational structures.³² Similarly, in the United Kingdom, pro-Palestine activism has faced criminalization, monitoring, and silencing, particularly targeting people of color and Muslim communities, highlighting the global reach of structural suppression and the risks inherent in such work.³³

Together, these cases suggest that student engagement—whether hesitant or assertive—is shaped by the interplay of moral commitment, political repression, and strategic negotiation of risk. West Bank students' partial participation thus reflects not exceptional disengagement but a normative, globally observed pattern of solidarity under constraint, connecting local experiences of wartime repression to broader transnational struggles for justice and liberation.

These findings point to several practical changes to foster safer and more effective forms of student engagement under conditions of occupation and political repression. Institutions close to students, like Palestinian universities, can play a protective and mediating role by creating sanctioned spaces for dialogue, cultural expression, and humanitarian engagement related to politically charged issues like the Gaza war. Forums, lectures, and solidarity initiatives may allow students to express collective concern without incurring disciplinary or security risks. Revitalizing student unions as inclusive, non-factional platforms focused on coordination and representation—rather than partisan competition—could further strengthen organizational capacity and trust.

The Palestinian Authority and its external supporters must reduce policing of campuses and safeguard students' rights to expression and association. Clear protections against surveillance,

³⁰ Right to Education, *Report on Access and Barriers to Higher Education in Palestine* (2024); and Rabaia and Habash, "Hidden War."

³¹ Erica Chenoweth, Soha Hammam, Jeremy Pressman, and Jay Ulfelder, "Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023–2024," *Social Movement Studies* (2024).

³² Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, "Resistance to Repression and Back Again: The Movement for Palestinian Liberation in US Academia," *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 3 (2024): 313–33; Jason C. Mueller, "A New Political Diagonal: How Students in the United States Constructed Internationalist Solidarity with Palestine," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 26, no. 3 (2025): 401–430.

³³ Brendan Ciarán Browne, Elian Weizman, and Jennifer Matchain, "Unpacking the Crackdown on Palestine Solidarity Activism in the UK in a Post-7 October Reality," *Third World Quarterly* (2025).

arrest, or academic sanctions would address barriers identified by participants and help restore confidence in civic participation among youth. For NGOs, external actors, and transnational activist networks, the results suggest the importance of supporting low-risk and sustainable forms of engagement rather than emphasizing mass mobilization alone. Digital advocacy, fundraising, educational initiatives, and training in digital security and safe organizing practices can help students remain active while minimizing exposure to harm.

The study has some limitations. Its qualitative design provides insights into lived experiences but is not statistically generalizable. Participants' narratives may have been influenced by social desirability or caution due to political sensitivities. Additionally, the focus on the specific period of the Gaza war limits temporal applicability, and the perspectives of students in Gaza, East Jerusalem, or outside formal higher education remain unexplored.

Future research should expand these insights through comparative studies across different geographic and political contexts, including Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the diaspora. Longitudinal research could examine how prolonged exposure to conflict, media, and structural repression shapes resilience, engagement, and psychological outcomes over time. Further investigation of digital activism dynamics, intersectional factors such as gender and socioeconomic status, and the role of institutional support could inform strategies to facilitate safer, more effective youth mobilization in contexts of occupation and protracted conflict.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Descriptive summary of study participants (N = 62)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	40	64.5
	Male	22	35.5
Age	Under 20	20	32.3
	20–22	37	59.7
	23–25	5	8.1
University	An-Najah National University	16	25.8
	Arab American University in Jenin	10	16.1
	Birzeit University	10	16.1
	Al-Quds (Abu Dies) University	8	12.9
	Hebron University	6	9.7
	Palestine Technical University—Kadoorie	6	9.7
	Other / not specified	6	9.7
Academic year	First	12	19.4
	Second	10	16.1
	Third	21	33.9
	Fourth or higher	19	30.6
Place of residence	City	22	35.5
	Village	30	48.4
	Refugee camp	10	16.1
Solidarity participation	Yes	14	22.6
	Sometimes	15	24.2
	No	33	53.2

TABLE A2 Semi-structured interview questions by theme

Theme	No.	Question
Participation in solidarity activities	1	Did you participate in solidarity activities for Gaza during the 2023 war? Please describe your involvement.
	2	If yes, what forms of participation did you engage in (e.g., rallies, donations, online activism, boycotts)?
	3	If sometimes or no, what factors prevented you from participating?
	4	What would encourage or enable you to participate in the future?
Psychological motives and personal attitudes	5	How do concerns about safety, arrest, or persecution affect your willingness to participate in solidarity activities?
	6	How do you feel when you hear about the situation in Gaza?
	7	Do you believe your own actions or participation can make a difference? Please explain.
	8	Can you describe any experiences of political exhaustion, frustration, or emotional fatigue related to these issues?

(Continues)

TABLE A2 (Continued)

Theme	No.	Question
Political and social environment	9	How would you describe the student environment at your university in terms of encouraging solidarity with Gaza?
	10	How do Palestinian security forces influence or limit participation in solidarity activities?
	11	In what ways, if any, does fear of Palestinian Authority suppression affect your participation in events or demonstrations?
	12	How do Palestinian factions inside the university contribute to—or hinder—solidarity efforts?
	13	Has coordination with security institutions impacted your ability to engage with solidarity events? If so, how?
Knowledge, media, and cultural awareness	14	Can you describe how often you follow news or updates about what is happening in Gaza?
	15	How would you personally describe the situation in Gaza?
	16	What sources do you rely on to learn about events in Gaza, and why?
	17	How do you evaluate the role and performance of the resistance in Gaza from your perspective?
	18	Do you perceive a cultural or emotional gap between Gaza and the West Bank? Can you explain your view?
	19	How effective do you think cultural and media support for Gaza has been, in your experience?
	20	In your opinion, does official Palestinian media fulfill its role in motivating solidarity? Why or why not?
	21	How has social media influenced your awareness of events in Gaza? Can you give examples?