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The Impact of Factional Discourse On the Palestinian National Cause

Munther Saeedi | Oqab Jabali | Muath Ishtaiyeh | Abed Alkhaleq Esa | Mohammad Dabous

Dr. Saeedi is a lecturer in the Language Center, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. Dr. Jabali is an assistant professor of cultural studies in the Language Center, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University. Dr. Ishtaiyeh is an assistant professor of Arabic at Istiqlal University in Jericho, Palestine. Dr. Esa is the dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences, An-Najah National University. Dr. Dabous is an assistant professor of education at Istiqlal University.

Correspondence
Oqab Jabali
oqab.jabali@najah.edu

Abstract

With the Israeli war on Gaza raging, the Palestinian national movement must overcome divides that have weakened the cause. This study delves into the ramifications of divisive discourse on factionalism in Palestine, focusing on the dynamic between Hamas and Fatah. To do so, it investigates the effects of polarization on the sense of collective consciousness among university students in the occupied territories. Through a questionnaire designed to elicit the perspectives of these young adults, this research sheds light on the extent to which rhetoric employed to provoke or incite aggressive behavior has affected cohesion in Palestinian politics and society, as well as individuals' beliefs in the possibility of a national movement. The article finds that in all of these facets, young adults have a high degree of cynicism and see divisive discourse reducing faith in institutions and leaders, causing rifts among friends and neighbors, and even leading them to think about emigrating. While the study was conducted before the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023, which may force some compromise between factions, the survey results indicate the immense amount of work required to unify the movement.

Palestinian society, long before the 2023–24 Israeli war on Gaza, has been polarized over support for Fatah or Hamas. This has led to a political system divided between the West Bank and Gaza, hindering national objectives and increasing hostilities and violent outbursts.[1] The sharp divisions have led to political rivalry, armed conflict, competing governance structures, media wars, and ideological differences. Crucially, they have made it difficult to establish a cohesive national front.[2] The social and political divisions in Palestine have also been influenced by outside parties, including neighboring states, regional players, and global powers—especially Israel, Arab countries, and the United States.[3] Geopolitical motivations other than concern for justice have exacerbated the existing divisions and hampered reconciliation efforts.

The ongoing conflict sparked by Hamas's October 7, 2023, assault on Israel demonstrates that Palestinian policy makers and stakeholders must understand how these political divisions, exacerbated by provocative rhetoric, have affected politics, society, and individuals' beliefs and identities. Such divisive discourse undermines social cohesion, diverts attention from the tackling of issues like Israel's illegal occupation, socioeconomic inequality, access to services, and democratic rights. The rift has also impacted Palestine's position in international diplomacy, reducing the effectiveness of its struggle for statehood.[4]

Palestinian society includes many different religious, racial, and political groups. Its varied ideologies, such as nationalism, Islamism, and secularism, have the potential to sow divisions and produce different visions for the future of Palestine.[5] The Hamas-Fatah rivalry has resulted in deep polarization.[6] This has been part of a vicious circle, with society suffering from distorted, nondemocratic values, which has led to further division and the undermining of social relations, mutual understanding, tolerance, and trust.[7] Palestinians must oppose exclusionary systems and not allow nationalist, Islamist, or any other version of supremacy to take root.[8]

This study analyzes the impact of Fatah's and Hamas's discourses on Palestinians and their society. The researchers do this by evaluating how university students perceive the effects of language on political polarization, social relations, and their own values. Understanding their perspectives on the peace process and normalization can help us assess the feasibility of reconciliation initiatives. A 27-statement questionnaire was developed to measure the perceptions of these young adults. The analysis of the responses indicates mostly high levels of agreement about the pernicious effects of political discourse. The only statistically significant difference among

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[1] Ghaith Al-Omari, "Palestinian Politics Are More Divided Than Ever," World Politics Review, May 27, 2021, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/after-the-latest-palestinian-israeli-conflict-fatah-and-hamas-are-more-divided-than-ever.

[2] Magid Shihade, "Rediscovering Religion and Secularism," Social Transformations Journal of the Global South 4, no. 1 (March 2016).

[3] George E. Bisharat, "Re-Democratizing Palestinian Politics," UCLA Journal of International Law and Foreign Affairs 17, no. 1–2 (Spring 2013).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Nathan J. Brown, "Religion and Politics in Palestine: Debates about Islam and the Hamas-Fatah Schism," Heinrich Böll Stiftung, March 9, 2010, https://www.boell.de/en/2010/03/03/religion-and-politics-palestine-debates-about-islam-and-hamas-fatah-schism.

[6] M.A. Asalyyia and Y.S. Abu Ajweh, "The Palestinian division and its relationship to political alienation from the point of view of university students: An applied study on a sample of Al-Aqsa University students," Al-Aqsa University Journal 17, no. 2 (2013).

[7] Abdalhadi Alijla, "Political Division and Social Destruction," Contemporary Arab Affairs 12, no. 2 (2019), doi:10.1525/caa.2019.122004.

[8] Ibid.

respondents is found in the locations of their universities—either in the West Bank or Gaza. The findings indicate how rhetoric has weakened collective consciousness among Palestinians. Future studies will require expanding the population beyond university students.

It is not yet possible to know how the post-October 7 war is affecting the dynamics that the researchers observe. However, the findings suggest that even if the United States and regional players succeed in brokering an end to the violent conflict, polarization among Palestinians could remain an obstacle to a comprehensive peace. Of course, it is possible that the onslaught is reducing some of the political divisions and that this will allow for collective consciousness and a united struggle for statehood.

POLARIZATION AND THE EROSION OF THE NATIONAL CAUSE

Division in Palestine

The internal rifts are seen as emerging from the collision of two different sociopolitical frameworks. Each has a distinct logic and means to mobilize society. The internal disputes, corruption, and incompetence of the Palestinian Authority (PA) played a role in Israel's destruction of governance in the occupied territories. Additionally, Hamas's position outside the framework of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the PA, and its aspiration to replace the PLO, also contributed to the political divisions.[9]

The initial objectives of the PLO were to free Palestine from Israeli occupation and create a sovereign state. But the establishment of Hamas in the late 1980s, during the first intifada, led to the politicization and popularity of the Islamist movement. This sparked a competitive relationship with the secular-nationalist PLO. While Hamas and other groups took a combative stance toward Israel, the PLO pursued the negotiated peace process that began in the early 1990s. The rivalry grew bitter as Fatah, the major party in the PLO, increasingly cooperated with and accommodated Israel. Some Palestinians believed that their longstanding demands for self-determination, the right of refugees to return, and the creation of an independent state had been compromised because of the change in priorities and strategy.

Hamas's unexpected victory during the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections further intensified the rivalry. Both camps have been engaged in acrimonious competition as reflected in their policies, such as the exclusion of supporters of the opposing party from government and repression of their activities within civil society. Such acts of repression risk weakening and destroying interpersonal bonds of cooperation and trust among members of the society.[10]

Polarization has grown in institutions like the press and in party-affiliated media, where each side accuses the other of antinationalist behavior. Indeed, the divisions have led to bans on opponents' newspapers.[11] In addition, the political divisions have created a complex and challenging environment for individuals and families living in Palestine. Families have been

[9] Salem Barahmeh, "The Palestinians, the PLO, and Political Representation: the Search for Palestinian Self-Determination," Atkin Paper Series, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (June 2014), https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ICSR_Atkin-Series_Salem-Barahmeh.pdf.

[10] Noemi Casati, "Political participation in a Palestinian university," *Ethnography* 17, no. 4 (2016).

[11] Yaser Alashqar, "The Politics of Social Structures in the Palestinian Case: From National Resistance to Depoliticization and Liberalization," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2018), https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7040069.

divided, and the physical separation has resulted, in some cases, in divergent political affiliations. Relationships can become strained by disagreements over political philosophies and allegiances, leading to conflicts that extend into the personal sphere.[12]

The division and internal factionalism also affected school and university students. Schools and universities play a complementary role to families by allowing individuals to nurture their beliefs and identities. However, these institutions have been easy to penetrate. Students are influenced and plunged into the abyss of social and political divisions. For example, An-Najah National University in the West Bank city of Nablus is dominated by Fatah and run by its proponents. In one incident,

> the Council of Deans banned all independent political activities, allowing only those organized through the Student Union, led by Fatah's Youth Students' Movement. The Islamic Bloc, a Hamas-affiliated student group, contested the decision and tensions began to escalate. On 24 July 2007, violent demonstrations broke out and culminated in the killing of a male student on campus.[13]

Discourse in Palestine

Divisive language increases tensions and enmity.[14] Mutz sees uncivil discourse as "communication that violates the norms of politeness for a given culture…because it is partisan, inaccurate, negative, or polarized."[15] This last part is the most important, as such language can affect individual perception and, in turn, infect politics and society: "Emotional arousal can in extreme cases make the individual function with an overshadowing cognitive cleavage of the world in just two categories: those that are 'with me' and those that are 'against me.'"[16] Employed strategically, divisive discourse can be used to

> emphasize people's differences, to alienate those who disagree with the speaker, to instill hostility between different groups, and to engage with radical statements far outside the norms of political discourse. Ultimately, the goal of this language is to establish an "us" vs. "them" worldview. In order for rhetoric to be divisive, it includes elements of uncivil language, negativity, and elite polarization.[17]

Such an "us versus them" mentality has been part of the escalating tensions between Fatah and Hamas.[18] The discourse and political terms used by both sides have devolved into slogans based

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[12] Alijla, "Political Division and Social Destruction."

[13] Casati, "Political participation in a Palestinian university."

[14] I. Khouri, "Palestine, where to? What happened in Gaza? And why did the 'Hamas' movement resort to the bloody military coup?" Al-Ayyam, July 7, 2007.

[15] Diana C. Mutz, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

[16] Ioannis Tsoukalas, "Exploring the Microfoundations of Group Consciousness," *Culture & Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2007), doi:10.1177/1354067x07073650.

[17] Trevor Albert Winans, "Divisive rhetoric and adverse language in American political discourse," master's thesis, Boston University, 2019, 3.

[18] Shihade, "Rediscovering Religion and Secularism."

on political and religious affiliations.[19] This has undermined Palestinians' trust in the parties and discouraged cooperation. Incendiary language has often replaced reasoned dialogue, restricting the exchange of viewpoints and consensus building. People exposed to such sloganeering will grow frustrated and insecure.[20] More than just dividing people into two sides, however, divisive discourse also erodes beliefs that either side can address key social needs or end the occupation, and it threatens the Palestinian national idea.[21]

Websites and other media created by followers of Fatah and Hamas actively promote resentment, hostility, and retaliation through emotionally charged rhetoric that denigrates, intimidates, and threatens. These strategies seek to influence readers and viewers on an emotional level, instilling hostile feelings. Both Fatah and Hamas turn to unofficial channels, such as university students, to spread media content promoting excommunication, intimidation, hatred, hostility, and animosity.[22] Through targeted and coded messaging, they advance their divisive narratives and shape public perceptions. We can see this play out on the ground. Ein el-Helwa, a Palestinian refugee camp situated near Sidon in southern Lebanon, is home to multiple Palestinian factions, including Fatah, Hamas, and smaller groups.[23] The camp has experienced factional rivalries and violent clashes, largely driven by these dynamics.[24]

We can find many examples of polarization in Palestinian discourse, even through the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war in fall 2023. One observer notes that Fatah has attempted "incitement" through the "portrayal of Hamas as wielding a powerful and malevolent weapon, one marked by betrayal and disloyalty, capable of inflicting destruction unmatched by any other."[25] Indeed, Fatah leaders have accused the Islamic resistance of "dragging the Palestinian people into an unbalanced conflict that will unavoidably result in fatalities, bloodshed, and extensive destruction."[26] In language aimed at university students, Fatah sympathizers accuse Hamas "of orchestrating a coup against legitimacy in Gaza. Ironically, the rockets fired from Gaza are dismissed as ineffective and indiscriminate since they do not significantly harm or damage anything."[27]

After the attacks of October 7, Fatah continued to use discourse that excludes Hamas from the Palestinian fabric. PA President Mahmoud Abbas, meeting Jordan's King Abdullah in Amman, declared: "We reject the practices of killing civilians or abusing them on both sides because they contravene morals, religion and international law."[28] Soon after, Abbas

[19] Eitan Alimi, "Discursive Contention: Palestinian Media Discourse and the Inception of the 'First' Intifada," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 4 (2007): 71–91, doi:10.1177/1081180x07307412.

[20] A. Jadallah, "The Palestinian division 2007, conditions and repercussions," master's thesis, Hebron University, Palestine, 2007; Samer Sobhi Rasheed Baniowda, "The implication of the Palestinian political division on the Palestinian foreign policy (2007-2016)," master's thesis, An-Najah National University, Palestine, 2007.

[21] Al-Omari, "Palestinian Politics."

[22] E. Abu Esheh, "Accusations are exchanged between 'Fatah' and 'Hamas' regarding the protection of armed operations," *Independent Arabia*, 2023, https://www.independentarabia.com/node/433296, in Arabic.

[23] Al Jazeera, "Clashes between Palestinian factions resume in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp," September 8, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/8/clashes-between-palestinian-factions-resume-in-lebanons-ein-el-hilweh-camp.

[24] Al Jazeera, "Deadly fighting continues in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh Palestinian camp," September 13, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/deadly-fighting-continues-in-lebanons-ein-el-hilweh-palestinian-camp.

[25] *Palestine Today* archive, May 2009. Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, 2019.

[26] Deutsche Welle, "The Gaza war's irony casts a shadow over the Fatah-Hamas relations," 2014, in Arabic.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ali Sawafta, "Palestinian President Abbas condemns violence against civilians," Reuters, October 12, 2023.

questioned the legitimacy of the Islamic resistance and underscored that peaceful means are the only tools to oppose occupation. (He later retracted this comment.)[29] Other party leaders and spokespeople similarly disavowed involvement in Hamas's conflict with Israel, and Ahmed Majdalani, a PA minister, went as far as to label Hamas a terrorist organization. Leaders of the resistance rejected these accusations, with Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh dismissing any attempt to have the PA run Gaza after the war as nothing more than an "illusion and mirage."[30]

But the divisive discourse runs both ways. Hamas followers accuse Fatah of treachery, as it cooperates with the Israeli occupation in terms of security and tracks Palestinian militants who carry out attacks against Israelis. The party detains all people who are designated as "informers, collaborators, or traitors."[31] Anti-Fatah activists consider this worse than betrayal by an enemy. The party has been accused of serving Israel's interests and being more concerned with its US relations than with the well-being of Palestinians.[32]

Collective Consciousness and the National Good

A variety of discursive regimes and practices contribute to the complexity and multilayered nature of Palestinian political language.[33] This has profound effects on Palestinian collective consciousness. The sense of social identity has during some periods been very strong, especially in times of external aggression like the 1948 *Nakba* and the 1967 *Naksa*.

According to Lori Allen, "Accusations that factional and individual interests are prioritized over the shared national good" have always been prominent in Palestinian discourse.[34] However, this has in the past been agonistic rather than antagonistic, with each faction looking at rivals as opponents but not enemies. The factional discourse has been accompanied by a state of flux in internal Palestinian relations. Among university students, Noemi Casati contends, "it is not political participation per se that is subject to surveillance and repression, but activities in support of opposition groups."[35] Ultimately, the discourses are not necessarily fixed but flexible. Their ultimate purpose is to achieve the interests of the party, above considerations such as national unity.

Previous studies have sought to identify the factors that led to the major schism between Hamas and Fatah in 2007.[36] This research shows how rifts among individuals, within politics, and across society have affected Palestinian foreign policy and the national project. But this work

[29] Samer Jaber, "The US plan to revamp the Palestinian Authority is doomed to fail," Al Jazeera, January 20, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/20/the-us-plan-to-revamp-the-palestinian-authority-is-doomed-to-fail.

[30] Al Jazeera, "Adviser to Abbas: The president condemned Hamas in every call and meeting he held with world leaders," December 8, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2023/12/8, in Arabic.

[31] *Palestine Today* archive, May 2009.

[32] Khouri, "Palestine, where to?"; Jaber, "US plan to revamp."

[33] Emile Albadarin, *Palestinian Political Discourse: Between Exile and Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[34] Lori Allen, "Sincerity, Hypocrisy, and Conspiracy Theory in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 4 (November 2016), doi:10.1017/S0020743816000830.

[35] Casati, "Political participation in a Palestinian university."

[36] Alijla, "Political Division and Social Destruction"; Jadallah, "The Palestinian division"; Baniowda, "The implication of the Palestinian political division."

has not considered how discourse has created the internal conflicts, has affected the perceptions of university students, or has divided the collective consciousness.

SURVEY OF PALESTINIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

This study aims to understand how divisive political discourse has affected collective consciousness in Palestine. It examines the role of political parties' language in undermining the social fabric. It also provides an overview of collective consciousness among university students, which results from divisions between factions. It is the first of its kind to measure the perspectives of these young adults. Most important, it seeks to understand how the sharp divisions between Fatah and Hamas have not only contributed to intolerance, distrust, and insecurity, but also diverted energy from the common Palestinian struggle against occupation and for an independent state.

The researchers seek to answer two questions:

1. How has divisive discourse affected Palestinian collective consciousness?
2. Are there any variables—such as gender, type of residence, type of field of study, or university affiliation—that affect university students' perceptions of the effects of divisive discourse?

On the second question, the authors hypothesize that there are no statistically significant variables that explain differences among university students' perceptions of the effects of divisive discourse on Palestinian politics, social cohesion, and individuals.

To answer these questions, the researchers created a three-part questionnaire featuring 27 statements on the various effects of divisive discourse. The respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement based on a five-point Likert scale:

- Strongly agree: 5
- Agree: 4
- Uncertain: 3
- Do not agree: 2
- Strongly disagree: 1

To understand the effects of divisive discourse on politics, the survey included these declarations, among nine total:

- The language used by both sides has convinced me that the national cause is in decline.
- The language used by both sides has made me doubt the possibility of national action.

On the subject of the social effects of such discourse, the survey included these questions, out of seven total:

- The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement among neighbors due to political affiliation.
- The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement within the Palestinian family.

TABLE 1 Key characteristics of 522 survey respondents

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	213	40.8
Female	309	59.2
Place of residence		
City	242	46.4
Village	208	39.8
Refugee camp	72	13.8
University affiliation		
An-Najah National University	218	41.8
Birzeit University	144	27.6
Islamic University	160	30.7
Type of faculty		
Humanities	232	44.4
Scientific	290	55.6

Regarding how individual beliefs have been affected by divisive language, the survey offered 11 statements, including:

- The language used by both sides has made me lose trust in national leaders.
- The language used by both sides has made me frustrated.

A draft of the questionnaire was presented to a group of arbitrators and specialists in political science, Arabic language, English language, and assessment and measurement. They were asked to evaluate the statements in terms of their formulation, linguistic accuracy, and suitability. For each statement, they could agree, amend the wording, or delete it altogether. The opinion of the majority was considered in the arbitration process. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.912 for the total 27 items. A value higher than 0.7 shows the questionnaire is reliable.

The survey was distributed to a randomly selected group of 550 students from three Palestinian universities. Two of the schools, An-Najah National University in Nablus and Birzeit University in Ramallah, are located in the West Bank. The third is the Islamic University of Gaza. Of the 550 surveys, 522 were returned. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the respondents by gender, type of residence, university affiliation, and type of curriculum. Tables 2–4 show the mean responses to each question based on the Likert scale, the standard deviation, and whether the agreement can be considered very low, low, medium, high, or very high. In addition, for each type of statement (the effects on politics, the effects on society, and the effects on the individual), Tables 2–4 include the aggregated mean, standard deviation, and degree of agreement. The degrees of agreement were determined by graded pentatonic scale classes:

- 1–1.8: Very low
- 1.81–2.6: Low
- 2.61–3.4: Medium
- 3.41–4.2: High
- 4.21–5: Very high

T A B L E 2 University students' beliefs about the political effects of discourse

Statement	Mean	St Dev	Degree
The language used by both sides discourages me from participating in national events.	3.58	1.07	High
The language used by both sides discourages me from following national issues in the media.	3.21	1.16	Medium
The language used by both sides discourages me from engaging in discussions about national issues.	3.47	1.14	High
The language used by both sides has made me realize that all news about reconciliation is just for local consumption.	4.11	0.94	High
The language by both sides has shifted my focus from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the Palestinian-Palestinian conflict.	3.5	1.15	High
The language used by both sides has convinced me that the national cause is in decline.	4.04	0.99	High
The language used by both sides discourages me from freely expressing my views to individuals with different political affiliations.	3.62	1.12	High
The language used by both sides has convinced me that they are concerned only with slogans and that the rhetoric is not credible.	3.97	0.98	High
The language used by both sides has made me doubt the possibility of national action.	3.87	1	High
Aggregate	**3.71**	**0.7**	**High**

T A B L E 3 University students' beliefs about the social effects of discourse

Statement	Mean	St Dev	Degree
The language used by both sides has created problems within the Palestinian family.	3.76	0.98	High
The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement within the Palestinian family.	3.55	1	High
The language used by both sides has sometimes influenced marriage decisions due to political affiliation.	3.73	1	High
The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement among neighbors due to political affiliation.	4.13	0.77	High
The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement among friends when political affiliations are different.	3.66	0.95	High
The language used by both sides has sometimes created estrangement among colleagues when political affiliations are different.	3.65	0.93	High
The language used by both sides has reduced my participation in social events (such as weddings or condolences) due to political affiliations.	3.13	1.15	Medium
Aggregate	**3.66**	**0.69**	**High**

TABLE 4   University students' beliefs about the individual effects of discourse

Statement	Mean	St Dev	Degree
The language used by both sides has given me a sense of political alienation.	3.8	0.94	High
The language used by both sides has reduced my sense of national identity.	2.78	1.32	Medium
The language used by both sides has made me lose faith in Palestinian political institutions.	3.92	0.95	High
The language used by both sides has led to a higher level of hatred in Palestinian society.	3.96	0.96	High
The language used by both sides has generated a feeling that political rivals are enemies.	3.83	1	High
The language used by both sides has made me lose trust in national leaders.	4.04	0.95	High
The language used by both sides distorts collective consciousness.	3.6	1.03	High
The language used by both sides has made me look out for my personal interests only.	3.3	1.16	Medium
The language used by both sides has made me feel insecure.	3.85	0.94	High
The language used by both sides has made me frustrated.	3.61	1.2	High
The language used by both sides has made me feel afraid for the future and consider emigrating.	3.94	0.97	High
Aggregate	**3.69**	**0.68**	**High**

The survey results in those three tables show a high degree of agreement in all three categories, indicating that these students believe that discourse in Palestine is eroding collection consciousness. Their reactions to the political statements suggest that they see language as just for show and not credible, but also that the effects are serious. The discourse, they say, tends to lessen engagement in political debate, reduce focus on the national cause, and decrease optimism over the struggle for statehood. The statements with the highest degrees of agreement are that divisive discourse has made them "realize that all news about reconciliation is just for local consumption," and it has "convinced me that the national cause is in decline." The results also indicate that the students have the most concern with the effects of this language on the political domain.

The respondents also tended to agree that there are many adverse effects on society, with political rhetoric causing disorder. This is not just about a collective, national consciousness: The language has divided families, friends, and neighbors; and political affiliations have "sometimes influenced marriage decisions." As far as the impact on themselves, students see the discourse as affecting not just leaders and institutions, but also creating political alienation and stoking feelings that rivals are really enemies. There are some silver linings here. The responses indicate that these young adults are not as negative about their sense of national identity, and they do not necessarily agree that the language is making them concerned mostly with their self-interests. However, there is a major trouble sign in the final question, as seen in Table 4. This statement had a high degree of agreement: "The language used by both sides has made me feel afraid for the future and consider emigrating."

TABLE 5 Significance of responses based on gender, t-test results

Domain	Male (N = 213)		Female (N = 309)		t	F*
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Political	3.65	0.73	3.74	0.55	1.320	0.188
Social	3.71	0.69	3.61	0.68	1.552	0.121
Individual	3.72	0.68	3.67	0.67	0.792	0.429
Total	3.70	0.50	3.68	0.55	0.322	0.748

*Statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

TABLE 6 Significance of responses based on type of residence, one-way ANOVA results

Domain	Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F	P
Political	Between groups	1.275	2	0.637	1.310	0.271
	Within groups	252.581	519	0.487		
	Total	253.855	521			
Social	Between groups	1.801	2	0.900	1.885	0.153
	Within groups	247.842	519	0.478		
	Total	249.643	521			
Individual	Between groups	2.072	2	1.036	2.250	0.106
	Within groups	238.981	519	0.460		
	Total	241.053	521			
Total	Between groups	0.706	2	0.353	1.085	0.338
	Within groups	168.747	519	0.325		
	Total	169.452	521			

Differences Within the Population?

The researchers hypothesized that there were no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) among respondents based on gender, type of residence, type of field of study, or university affiliation. To test this, they used an independent t-test or a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test, depending on the number of variables.

Table 5 shows that on the question of whether there was a gender divide among respondents, the independent t-test found no statistically significant differences. Male and female university students are exposed to and interact with similar media and discourses, so they appear to have similar perceptions of the effects on collective consciousness. On the question of whether there are differences based on the type of residential background—city, village, or refugee camp—a one-way ANOVA test, as shown in Table 6, indicates that there were no statistically significant divisions. Similarly, Table 7 demonstrates that testing did not show any differences based on the faculty of study, either the humanities or the sciences.

However, one hypothesis failed: that there were no differences based on university affiliation. To test this hypothesis, the researchers used a one-way ANOVA test and found statistically significant differences due to university affiliation in the respondents' answers on the social and individual effects of divisive discourse as shown in Table 8; statistical significance was found across the entire set of 27 responses, as well. To identify the sources of variance, the researchers conducted a post-hoc Scheffé test (Table 9). Statistically significant differences were found in

TABLE 7 Significance of responses based on type of faculty, t-test results

Domain	Humanities (N = 232)		Scientific (N = 290)		t	F*
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Political	3.65	0.74	3.74	0.66	1.475	0.141
Social	3.66	0.72	3.65	0.67	0.182	0.856
Psychological	3.67	0.68	3.71	0.68	0.707	0.480
Total	3.66	0.58	3.70	0.55	0.891	0.374

*Statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

TABLE 8 Significance of responses based on university affiliation, one-way ANOVA

Domain	Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F	P
Political	Between groups	2.321	2	1.161	2.395	.092
	Within groups	251.534	519	.485		
	Total	253.855	521			
Social	Between groups	9.728	2	4.864	10.522	.000*
	Within groups	239.914	519	.462		
	Total	249.643	521			
Individual	Between groups	4.060	2	2.030	4.445	.012*
	Within groups	236.993	519	.457		
	Total	241.053	521			
Total	Between groups	4.532	2	2.266	7.130	.001*
	Within groups	164.921	519	.318		
	Total	169.452	521			

*Statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

responses on the social effects of discourse by students studying at the Islamic University of Gaza, compared to students at the other two universities. Statistically significant differences were also found in the responses to questions on the effects of discourse on individuals, as well as the total domain of responses, for Islamic University students compared to students at An-Najah University only. These differences suggest that the effects of discourse related to political divisions are higher in the Gaza Strip compared to the West Bank. Gaza is dominated by Hamas, and the Islamic University is run by Hamas proponents. It has also been subject to a blockade by Israel (reminder, the survey was distributed long before the 2023 war with Israel broke out).

CONCLUSION

This research provides insights into how divisive public discourse has undermined not just individual political beliefs and identities, but also Palestinian society and collective consciousness. The survey of university students shows how the divide between Fatah and Hamas has affected the perceptions and the optimism of Palestine's young adults. The increasing rifts have contributed to feelings of intolerance, distrust, and insecurity. More important, the political conflict has diverted attention away from the struggles against occupation and for statehood, and toward a

TABLE 9 Post-hoc Scheffé test based on university affiliation

Domain	Level	An-Najah National University	Birzeit University	Islamic University of Gaza
Social	An-Najah National University		−0.10742	−0.32319*
	Birzeit University			−0.21577*
	Islamic University of Gaza			
Individual	An-Najah National University		−0.08368	−0.20969*
	Birzeit University			−0.12601
	Islamic University of Gaza			
Total	An-Najah National University		−0.09090	−0.22159*
	Birzeit University			−0.13068
	Islamic University of Gaza			

Note: The values in the table represent the mean differences between universities within each domain.
*indicates statistical significance.

hateful, internal struggle for power and the realization of narrowly partisan goals. This has eroded patriotism, created an "us versus them" mentality, and threatened the cause for independence.[37]

The study results show that university students see divisive discourse as affecting their own beliefs and identities, and those of society. Collective consciousness has decreased due to feelings of threat to personal safety, as well as loss of faith in political factions and the overall system, all of which have led to more divisions. This is true across variables of gender, type of residence, and the type of study they are engaged in, whether the sciences or the humanities. However, statistical differences are found among respondents based on their university affiliation. The researchers found statistically significant differences over the social effects of divisive discourse if we compare students studying at the Islamic University of Gaza against those at the two campuses in the West Bank. Statistically significant differences were also found in the individual effects of divisive discourse and in the total domain of responses if we compare responses at Islamic University to those at An-Najah University.

Why these differences? Gaza and the West Bank have experienced different governance structures, forms of party rule, and levels of conflict. This can influence perceptions. Socialization and education in both regions reflect the ideologies of the governing authorities, influencing students' perceptions of political factionalism. While Hamas prioritizes Islam-centered curricula, Fatah is more secular. Moreover, family and community influences appear to be stronger in Gaza, especially among university students. Restrictions on freedom of expression in the West Bank may affect open discussion, while in Gaza there are more opportunities for critical engagement. "Palestinians were freer to express themselves in Gaza than was the case for their compatriots in the West Bank, where the combined efforts of the Israeli and Palestinian security forces intimidated the population and discouraged peaceful political activities," Larry Garber observes.[38]

The study findings show that differences in ideology and vision between Fatah and Hamas are the main causes of social division and political contention in Palestine. This has had dire consequences, from sowing distrust and intolerance to spurring chaos and violence. This polarization,

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[37] Tsoukalas, "Exploring the Microfoundations of Group Consciousness."

[38] Larry Garber, "Internal Palestinian Divisions and Their Consequences," Just Security, May 12, 2022, https://www.justsecurity.org/81446/internal-palestinian-divisions-and-their-consequences.

driven by the strategies of elites to achieve their political objectives by capitalizing on resentment and hatred, is a vicious cycle.

The study also suggests that the university is a fertile environment for sowing division. The younger Palestinian generation has a complex perspective on the debate between Hamas and Fatah. Many are skeptical and disillusioned, accusing the factions of seeking only their narrow interests and contributing to political and economic problems. They see language as being used for advantage instead of serving the Palestinian cause. A sizable portion believes that this internal strife undermines their statehood aspirations. Some see Hamas's and Fatah's rhetoric as outdated and at odds with their modern worries about things like job prospects, access to education, and personal freedoms. Still, political allegiances endure and are molded by regional and familial factors. The divisive rhetoric of these two factions has resulted in a nasty polarization that has not only created political crises and bloody conflicts, but also divisions between neighbors and even within families. The university students do not necessarily see rivals who do not share the same opinions, beliefs, or affiliation as enemies; however, polarization has increased.

While the responses of university students provide a look at how discourse has shaped young adults, studies like this should be broadened to include more sectors of Palestinian society. In addition, researchers could examine the effects of different types of discourses, including those found in neutral media outlets and outside of factional politics. Longitudinal comparisons might also be useful. Further research could be carried out to compare the political discourses of these two factions before and after Hamas's winning of the 2006 elections, as well as before and after the era of Yasser Arafat's leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Finally, future work should examine the use of factionally polarized rhetoric on social media, and how this affects Palestinian politics, society, and individual identities and beliefs.

Once again, it must be emphasized that this study was conducted before the Hamas attack inside Israel on October 7, 2023, and the resulting bombardment of Gaza. The brutal war, ongoing at the time of this writing, could shift some of these findings if Palestinians use the conflict to guild a collective consciousness. Jibril Rajoub, secretary general of Fatah's Central Committee, has called for a national reconciliation meeting in Algeria to end division, facilitate elections, and agree on a shared Palestinian project of struggle. A Hamas media adviser, Taher Al-Nono, supports the initiative. "Through national dialogue, we will reach a consensus on how to govern ourselves, how to lead our cause and present it to the world," a Fatah spokesman told Al Jazeera.[39] A recent poll shows a rise in support for Hamas in Gaza, while 90 percent of Palestinians reject Abbas and 70 percent want the dissolution of the Palestinian Authority. However, collective consciousness will likely require more than just shifts in conditions but changes in discourse, as well.

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[39] Urooba Jamal, "The beginning of the end? The hypothetical future of Palestinian politics," Al Jazeera, November 28, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/28/the-beginning-of-the-end-the-hypothetical-future-of-palestinian-politics.