



Reclaiming identity: The Gaza War's role in shaping Palestinian university students' resilience and life's meaning

Munther Saeedi^a, Oqab Jabali^{a,*}, Fakher Khalili^b

^a Language Center, Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

^b Department of Counselling and Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Existence
Gaza War 2023
Identity
Meaning of life
Purpose
Resilience
Values

ABSTRACT

The 2023 Gaza War has significantly impacted Palestinian identity and resilience, reshaping how individuals and communities perceive their sense of self and collective purpose amidst ongoing conflict and occupation. This study examines how the war has redefined resilience and identity among Palestinian university students, focusing on the ongoing process of redefining life and resistance under occupation. A purposive sample of 31 bachelor's degree students from An-Najah National University was selected for qualitative interviews, representing diverse academic disciplines. The results reveal that the war has significantly influenced students' perceptions of resilience and identity, highlighting a shift toward a more collective and culturally rooted understanding of these concepts. The narratives underscore the role of education and community support in fostering resilience, while reflecting on the ongoing challenges posed by occupation and conflict. The study concludes that the resilience inherent in Palestinian identity continues to evolve in response to the changing landscape of conflict and oppression, emphasizing the importance of recognizing these shifts as part of a broader, enduring process of resistance and adaptation.

1. Introduction

The 2023 Gaza War stands as a profoundly tragic episode within the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, marked by extraordinary levels of destruction and an escalating humanitarian crisis. Following the events of October 7, 2023, Israeli military forces launched extensive operations against Hamas, which triggered widespread reprisals throughout the West Bank alongside intensive airstrikes over the Gaza Strip.

The resulting bombardments devastated numerous neighborhoods, leaving thousands of families displaced, homeless, and deprived of access to vital infrastructure, including electricity, potable water, and sanitation services (Rantissi et al., 2024). The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has described the situation as plausible genocide (International Court of Justice, 2024), and numerous legal experts, human rights organizations, UN bodies, and scholars of genocide have classified it as such (UNDP, 2024; UNICEF, 2023; University Network for Human Rights, 2024; UNRWA, 2024). Beyond the immediate loss of shelter, essential institutions such as schools and hospitals were severely damaged or destroyed, thereby worsening the already critical conditions and severely limiting access to education and healthcare (Holail et al., 2024).

The conflict's repercussions extend beyond physical destruction to encompass deep social and psychological impacts that affect the fabric of Palestinian society. The loss of homes and familiar community spaces undermines a fundamental sense of safety and belonging, which, in turn, aggravates mental health challenges and contributes to social fragmentation (Abed Alah, 2024). The obliteration of medical and educational facilities compounds these challenges, as children face interruptions in schooling and injured or ill individuals encounter obstacles in obtaining adequate care, collectively intensifying community vulnerability and fueling feelings of despair (Asi et al., 2024).

Amidst this pervasive loss and hardship, Palestinians' perceptions of identity, belonging, and resilience have undergone profound transformation. As individuals and communities strive to preserve their sense of self and purpose amid persistent turmoil, the concept of Sumud — the cultural ethos of steadfastness — has emerged as a vital framework for understanding Palestinian endurance and hope (Alexei et al., 2019). This ethos not only sustains the struggle for survival in the short term but also provides a foundation for maintaining cultural continuity and collective resilience in the face of ongoing displacement and adversity.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: munther.saeedi@najah.edu (M. Saeedi), oqab.jabali@najah.edu (O. Jabali), f.khalili@najah.edu (F. Khalili).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105312>

Received 1 February 2025; Received in revised form 16 June 2025; Accepted 17 July 2025

Available online 21 July 2025

0001-6918/© 2025 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

2. Literature review

2.1. Impact of the October 7, 2023 conflict on Palestinian identity

Conflict and violence often serve as catalysts for introspection and redefinition of personal and collective identities. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has profoundly shaped Palestinian identity, reinforcing a transnational and anti-colonial consciousness that fosters solidarity and nurtures a shared aspiration for sovereignty and self-determination (Matar, 2024). The enduring legacy of historical trauma — most notably the Nakba and subsequent episodes of displacement and violence — remains a core element of Palestinian collective memory, continually informing identity construction and strengthening communal bonds (Al Nabulsi, 2023).

The ongoing conflict also affects individuals' values, societal roles, and notions of belonging in complex and often ambivalent ways. Palestinian students enrolled in Israeli institutions, for example, navigate daily challenges of discrimination and alienation, developing resilience strategies that shape both their academic trajectories and identity formation (Diab, 2024). Meanwhile, Palestinian literature has increasingly foregrounded the experiences of women, whose narratives reveal an evolving articulation of identity marked by empowerment and resistance (Veronese et al., 2021). However, there is scholarly debate regarding the consequences of centering identity too narrowly, with some cautioning that such focus may intensify social polarization and hinder opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation between Palestinian and Israeli communities (Jabali, Khalili, et al., 2024).

The complex interplay of identity and belonging also manifests in phenomena such as the “ethics of un-belonging,” where individuals experience tension between connection and alienation in contested spaces (Homayounpour, 2024). This tension highlights the psychological and social challenges Palestinians face as they negotiate identity within a context of prolonged conflict and occupation.

2.2. Palestinian resilience strategies

In response to enduring hardships, Palestinians have cultivated a diverse array of resilience strategies grounded in cultural and social practices. Central among these is *Sumud* — often translated as steadfastness or perseverance — which encapsulates the determination to withstand adversity while safeguarding cultural and national identity. *Sumud* embodies both an individual and collective psychological resilience, promoting mental fortitude and fostering communal solidarity. This ethos is visible in everyday acts of resistance, such as rebuilding damaged homes, maintaining educational endeavors despite siege conditions, and sustaining social networks (Hammad & Tribe, 2021).

Nonetheless, *Sumud* is not a homogeneous experience. Variations emerge across gender, socio-political affiliations, and personal circumstances. For some Palestinians, particularly women who shoulder disproportionate burdens in the resistance, the demands of continuous resilience can lead to emotional exhaustion, ambivalence, or internal conflict. Secular Palestinians and minority groups may experience or express *Sumud* differently, sometimes distancing themselves from traditional national narratives or symbols (Kayali, 2024). Palestinian youth, notably young women, play a critical role in reshaping resilience through grassroots activism and community initiatives, challenging prevailing social norms and expanding the meaning of *Sumud* to include both agency and struggle (Kayali, 2024).

Social support networks and communal rituals offer vital emotional sustenance in these contexts, enabling individuals to cope with trauma and uncertainty. Yet, these networks may also impose implicit expectations of unwavering strength, which can conflict with private experiences of vulnerability and mental distress (Veronese et al., 2023). Children, while often demonstrating remarkable resilience, exhibit diverse responses to trauma, with some internalizing stress or developing detachment, underscoring the heterogeneity within Palestinian

resilience frameworks (Harazneh et al., 2021).

Comparative research from other conflict zones, such as Syria and Ukraine, highlights the important role of digital platforms in facilitating grassroots mobilization and shaping identity-based resistance. In Syria, social media allowed activists to coordinate protests, disseminate information, and sustain international attention despite state repression (Ahmad & Hamasaheed, 2015; O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Similarly, during Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, online activism enabled communication and mobilization, shaped by complex dynamics of gender and identity (Bohdanova, 2014; Matveieva, 2025). These cases illustrate how technology intersects with identity and resistance, providing critical tools for engagement under conditions of authoritarianism and conflict.

2.3. Health, well-being, and life satisfaction

The cumulative psychological effects of prolonged violence in Palestine, especially in Gaza, have produced significant mental health challenges. Research indicates that mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression affect approximately 22 % of populations living in conflict zones, with Gaza's rates likely exceeding this average due to the intensity and duration of hostilities (Javanbakht, 2024; Nisa et al., 2024). These mental health burdens often have far-reaching, intergenerational impacts on children, families, and communities.

In response, mental health professionals are increasingly integrating political awareness and cultural responsiveness into their practices, recognizing the importance of addressing structural violence and socio-political stressors alongside clinical symptoms. Programs like the Tarkiz initiative exemplify locally adapted, community-driven mental health interventions that engage cultural knowledge and communal resources to enhance effectiveness and sustainability (Rockowitz et al., 2024; Veronese & Kagee, 2024).

2.4. Personal aspirations and future outlook

Repeated cycles of violence and socio-economic hardship profoundly shape Palestinian aspirations and perceptions of the future. Particularly in Gaza, prolonged conflict has contributed to widespread feelings of hopelessness and diminished morale (Roy, 2000). This context has fostered a collective identity deeply entwined with resistance and survival, often shifting attention from long-term goals toward immediate concerns (Roy, 2000).

Recent geopolitical developments, including the 2023 Gaza War, have influenced Palestinian youth's perspectives, leading to a reevaluation of ideals such as democracy and human rights, and a decline in faith toward Western political models (Jabali, Sleem, et al., 2024). Social support networks remain essential buffers, significantly influencing quality of life and well-being, especially amid overlapping crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Jalala et al., 2024). While adversity may strengthen resilience, it also poses risks of exacerbating despair, complicating efforts to envision a hopeful future.

2.5. Social relationships and community engagement

The conflict profoundly affects Palestinian social relationships, shaping interactions within families and communities. Shared hardship can enhance solidarity and foster resilience, as seen in the cohesive networks surrounding families of martyrs, which provide emotional support and facilitate coping (Attard, 2019; Harazneh et al., 2021). Conversely, normalized violence may escalate domestic abuse and destabilize family dynamics, reflecting the broader societal toll of prolonged conflict (Memmi, 2015).

Research underscores the protective role of strong familial and social ties in promoting emotional well-being and life satisfaction despite ongoing political violence. These supportive relationships are critical for

sustaining individuals and communities amid persistent adversity (Veronese et al., 2012).

2.6. Purpose of the study

This article explores how the 2023 Gaza conflict has triggered shifts in Palestinian collective and individual identities, highlighting new forms of resilience and adaptation beyond traditional frameworks. These changes affect family dynamics, community support, national sentiments, and political aspirations.

Conflict tests relationships with family, friends, and communities, often bringing people closer or creating distance through fear and uncertainty. Such events prompt deep reflection on values, identity, and social roles.

The study focuses on six key objectives: the impact of events after October 7, 2023, on physical and mental health and basic needs; changes in pleasure and happiness; effects on future aspirations and goals; shifts in relationships and community roles; evolving views on life’s value and personal existence; and altered perceptions of justice, values, and national identity. Overall, it aims to understand how the war has reshaped Palestinian resilience and identity amid ongoing conflict.

2.7. Statement of the problem

Through a combination of personal narratives from interviews with university students, sociopolitical analysis, and cultural critique, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Gaza War of 2023 has redefined resilience and identity for Palestinians. It will argue that these shifts are not merely reactions to the immediate conflict but are part of a broader, ongoing process of redefining what it means to live and resist under occupation. The findings will underscore the resilience inherent in the Palestinian identity, illustrating how it continues to evolve in response to the ever-changing landscape of conflict and oppression.

3. Methods

3.1. Study sample

This study focused solely on university students, who may hold more progressive or educated perspectives than the general population. As such, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of other demographic groups. A purposive sample of 31 participants was selected. All participants were bachelor’s degree students. These participants were An-Najah National University (ANNU) students from diverse academic disciplines, including Medicine, Nursing, Engineering, Computer Science, Media, Law, and Fine Arts. ANNU is a leading public university located in Nablus, Palestine. Established in 1977 as a full-fledged university (with roots as a college dating back to 1918), it is one of the largest and most prominent higher education institutions in the Palestinian territories. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in gender and geographic representation, including students from various areas within the West Bank and the territories occupied in 1948. To meet the inclusion criteria, participants had to be at least in their second year of university, ensuring they had experienced university life both before and after the events of October 7, 2023. Additionally, they were required to reside in student housing within the city of Nablus, be unmarried, and have no job or occupation, allowing them to focus fully on their studies. The following table describes the characteristics of the qualitative study sample:

The table lists the participants’ primary demographic and academic attributes in the qualitative study. There were slightly more female participants than male participants, with 14 (45 %) of the 31 participants being male and 17 (55 %) being female. As for academic specializations, there was a slightly balanced distribution across fields of study, with 17 (45 %) coming from the humanities and 14 (55 %) from

the natural sciences. Nine (28 %) participants were in their fourth or fifth year of study, 11 (36 %) were in their third year, and 11 (36 %) were in their second year. An in-depth examination of the study’s results is made possible by this distribution, which guarantees varied representation in terms of gender, academic specialization, and academic year (Table 1).

3.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to reveal both explicit and implicit patterns within participants’ narratives. The analysis aimed to identify key themes that reflect how university students perceive and experience shifts in identity and resilience in the context of the 2023 Gaza War.

The initial phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcribed responses to gain a deep understanding of the content. Coding was then conducted manually by a one the researchers, who is a professor in the Department of Counselling and Psychology at An-Najah National University, with extensive experience in qualitative research and trauma-informed analysis. A second independent coder, also trained in qualitative methods, was involved to ensure the reliability of the coding process. Both coders worked separately and then met to discuss discrepancies. Inter-coder agreement was assessed through comparison and consensus-building, ensuring consistency and enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Codes were derived inductively from the data and grouped into potential sub-themes and overarching themes. Examples of codes included “ruptured sense of future,” “family solidarity,” “emotional numbness,” and “reclaiming national pride.” These codes were then clustered into broader themes such as “disrupted life trajectories,” “evolving social relationships,” and “redefining identity under siege.” Thematic maps were created to explore how themes interrelated and contributed to the overarching research questions.

Finally, themes were reviewed, refined, and validated in light of the full dataset. The analysis remained grounded in participants’ voices, and selected illustrative quotes were included in the results section to enhance transparency and authenticity.

This rigorous, multi-step process ensured a robust analysis of the data and reflected the diversity of student experiences while acknowledging the limitations of the sample.

4. Results

4.1. Research questions

In order to obtain comprehensive information about the effects of the 2023 Gaza War on Palestinian university students, the authors created a set of six open-ended questions to direct their qualitative investigation.

Table 1
Characteristics of participants in the qualitative study sample.

Categorical Variable		Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Male	14	45 %
	Female	17	55 %
	Total	31	100 %
Specializations	Natural Sciences	17	55 %
	Humanities	14	45 %
	Total	31	100 %
	Second Year	11	36 %
Academic Year	Third Year	11	36 %
	Fourth or Fifth Year	9	28 %
	Total	31	100 %

1. How have the events following October 7, 2023, affected your physical and mental health, as well as your ability to meet your material and psychological needs?

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with university students identified key themes reflecting notable impacts on their mental and physical health, daily behaviors, and overall outlook on life following the events of October 7, 2023. Table 2 presents the proportion of students reporting significant effects across various dimensions of their well-being, illustrating widespread mental health challenges, behavioral disruptions, academic setbacks, and existential reflections resulting from these events.

As shown in the table above, mental and emotional health was a major theme, with a high percentage of students (85 %) reporting heightened anxiety, fear, and trauma symptoms due to the violent images from Gaza. Many expressed feelings of guilt and helplessness, as one participant shared, “How can you live your life knowing they are suffering?” Physical health was also considerably impacted, as the psychological stress from the events manifested in physical symptoms such as exhaustion, muscle cramps, and gastrointestinal issues. One female engineering student explained, “I started suffering from inflammation in my stomach and intestines due to mental stress. Most of us have started to experience tingling pains and crushing pains in the chest.” Finally, some students sought to cope with the anxiety of losing loved ones by spending more time with family and friends and helping those in need. One participant shared, ‘I started trying to compensate for the helplessness I felt by helping the poor.

The disruption of behaviors and daily routines was evident, with (90 %) of students becoming overly focused on news and conflict updates. This constant preoccupation affected their concentration, energy levels, and overall daily functioning. In contrast, heightened religious engagement surfaced as a coping mechanism. As one medical student noted, “Our minds are constantly occupied by the news and the war. Before the escalation, I wasn’t dedicated to prayer or reciting the Holy Quran; now, that has changed.”

The academic and social impacts were significant as well, with many students ($n = 26$) experiencing academic decline and disruptions in their sleep and eating patterns. The emotional and psychological toll influenced both their academic performance and social interactions, as they felt burdened by the contrast between their own circumstances and the suffering in Gaza.

Finally, the values and meaning of life were deeply questioned. Some students ($n = 17$) reported a sense of existential crisis, feeling that life had lost its meaning in the face of such violence. However, many also expressed pride in Palestinian resistance and a desire for revenge. One third year, male participant stated, “We realized that life is meaningless... there’s nothing in Gaza but death.”

2. How has your perception of pleasure, happiness, and enjoyment of life changed after these events?

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed notable shifts in university students’ perceptions of pleasure, happiness, and enjoyment of life following the events after October 7, 2023. Decline in enjoyment and happiness was a prominent theme, with many students (82 %) describing an inability to experience joy due to the ongoing conflict. The psychological toll of the situation made it difficult for them to engage in

pleasurable activities, as one humanities, male noted, “It’s hard to be happy. I can’t find the time to feel joy.” Similarly, the shifts in life values were also significant, as students began reassessing their priorities. There was a newfound appreciation for simple, essential aspects of life, such as family and basic necessities. As one student put it, “ Watching the news from Gaza, having a roof over our heads has become the most crucial thing for us.”

Linked to this are the restrictions and challenges increasingly felt by students, who faced limited recreational options due to economic hardships and security concerns. One student expressed this sentiment, saying, “We can’t go out like we used to; the fear of what might happen keeps us indoors, and even if we could, we don’t have the money to spend on outings anymore.” Travel and work outside Nablus became more difficult, which further diminished their ability to enjoy life. The impact on social and personal behaviors was another key theme. The shift to remote learning and movement restrictions led to weakened social connections, reducing the joy typically associated with university life. One fourth year, medicine student expressed, “The educational process has become saddening. There’s no joy in university life anymore.” Finally, nostalgia for life before the conflict emerged as a powerful sentiment. Many students longed for the stability and happiness they experienced before October 7th, expressing hopelessness and a desire for a return to normalcy. One female, humanities participant shared, “There’s been no joy since October 7th. My sister got engaged, but we didn’t even hold a celebration.”

3. How have these events affected your future aspirations and your ability to achieve your goals and dreams?

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed significant shifts in students’ perspectives regarding their future aspirations, priorities, and sense of hope in light of the ongoing circumstances. Fading of future dreams and ambitions was a dominant theme, with many students ($n = 29$) expressing a sense of hopelessness and uncertainty about their future. Several participants reported that their professional goals and plans for travel had vanished, leaving them with a pessimistic outlook on life. The future was described as “dark and hopeless,” with students expressing confusion about what awaited them. Students living outside Nablus shared their uncertainty, saying, “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Something might happen that prevents us from continuing our university education. It’s even difficult to focus on our studies under these conditions. Nothing is predictable.” Many also voiced a desire to leave the country in pursuit of safety, viewing travel as a necessary step toward stability, despite the difficulties it entails. As one second year, Fine Arts participant noted, “Everyone’s thinking now to leave Palestine.”

Despite these challenges, hope and resilience emerged as another significant theme. Some students maintained optimism and a commitment to stay and contribute to rebuilding their homeland. A few (35 %) emphasized the importance of perseverance, stating, “We need to do our best... I want to help in any way I can, even if it’s just about learning, staying in the country, and standing firm.” The change in priorities and values was also evident, with students re-evaluating their goals and shifting their focus to more immediate concerns. While many expressed a deeper appreciation for learning and a desire to contribute to nation-building, some acknowledged that the uncertainty of the future led them to focus on the present moment. Participant (4) shared, “Even future aspirations have changed completely. There were things I used to work to get them, but now I don’t care about them anymore. Now I focus on necessities and live in the moment... I no longer care about things I used to care about. They seem trivial to me now.”

4. How have the recent events affected your relationships with your family and friends and your view on your role in serving others and the community?

Table 2
Impact of October 7 Events on Student Well-being.

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting
Mental and Emotional Health	85 %
Behavioral Disruptions	90 %
Academic and Social Impact	83.9 %
Existential Crisis & Values	54.8 %

Analysis revealed profound effects of the events following October 7, 2023, on the students' relationships with their families and friends, as well as their views on their role in serving others and the community. The findings were summarized in the following themes:

Family relationships became stronger, with increased communication, empathy, and support, though some students experienced distance due to challenges like checkpoints, heightening their anxiety about losing loved ones. Most participants ($n = 27$) agree that "We started enjoying spending more time with my family... We tend to talk to our families more frequently than before." Furthermore, friendships within the same localities or neighborhoods were also strengthened, as students became more understanding and forgiving. However, restrictions and the inability to meet in person led to reduced interactions and concerns about the uncertainty of their relationships. 15 participants argued "We began to realize that the disagreements we had before were insignificant... we decided to focus on the present and steer clear of conflicts."

Students felt a stronger sense of community responsibility and a desire to contribute through volunteering and educating others about many issues including the conflict. A nursing student shared, "I began getting involved in voluntary work... I recently started volunteering with the Palestinian Red Crescent." Similarly, a political science student expressed, "I've taken it upon myself to educate others about the history of the Palestinian national movement and the wars Israel has waged on Gaza." However, social challenges emerged, with many students feeling frustrated and helpless due to repression, movement restrictions, and the difficulty of participating in community activities. As participants put it, "We scaled back my community activity because of the repression, the nature of movement restrictions, checkpoints, and invasions."

5. How has your perspective on the value of life, the meaning of your existence, and your role in it changed after these events?

The researchers found that heightened value of life and sense of purpose was evident. The brutal reality of the war and its widespread devastation has significantly altered how Palestinian students view the value of life. For many, the constant threat of death and the overwhelming loss of life in Gaza have led to a profound shift in their outlook on existence. As one student expressed, "After witnessing the destruction and the loss of so many lives, you start to feel the fragility of life. It becomes clear that every moment counts... It forces you to appreciate life in a way that wasn't as apparent before." Many students have reported a newfound sense of responsibility, not only to survive but to contribute meaningfully to their community and the Palestinian cause. This increased value of life is also linked to a collective desire to leave a legacy, as students are motivated to work harder to build a future in the face of such widespread adversity.

For many Palestinian students, their spiritual beliefs have become a central pillar of coping with the overwhelming hardships. The experience of war, loss, and displacement has fostered a deeper connection to faith and religious practices. As one nursing student (Participant 4) shared, "The war has made me more committed to my faith... It's my way of finding peace and meaning in a world full of chaos. My relationship with God has never been stronger." Prayer, Quran recitation, and acts of charity have provided a sense of comfort and grounding. Spirituality, in this context, becomes a tool not only for emotional survival but also for maintaining a sense of moral direction amidst the trauma.

While many students have found strength through spirituality and a renewed appreciation for life, others have struggled with profound despair. The devastating effects of the war, compounded by the international community's perceived indifference, have left some students questioning the meaning of their existence. Participant 1's statement, "The meaning of my life has become zero... Despair dominates, and I don't know what to do anymore," reflects this deep sense of loss. The students' sense of isolation and the lack of visible international support for the Palestinian cause have made it difficult for some to see a future.

This despair is not just personal but collective, as students wrestle with the broader injustice of their situation.

For many students, living under the constant threat of violence has left them with a pervasive fear of death, which shapes their daily existence. As one political science student (Participant 8) expressed, "Every day feels like a gift, and every moment could be our last... There's a constant possibility of dying at any moment." This fear isn't just about personal safety but extends to the safety of loved ones and the future of the Palestinian people. For students in areas directly affected by the war, this fear is compounded by the unpredictability of daily life, which further amplifies their sense of insecurity and existential anxiety.

6. To what extent have the current events affected your view on justice, human values, and your sense of national, cultural, and religious identity?

Thematic analysis revealed that the war has deeply influenced how Palestinian students perceive justice and human values. Many students now view the concepts of justice and equality in a more urgent and personal light, as they witness the continuous violation of their rights and the lack of international accountability. As one Law student shared, "I once believed that justice was something that could be achieved through diplomacy and law, but after seeing the atrocities of the war, I've realized that true justice is a matter of survival for us, not just a legal issue." The violence and destruction inflicted on Palestinian civilians, especially during the 2023 war, have shifted many students' beliefs about the fairness of the world, deepening their understanding of justice as not just an ideal, but as a practical and urgent need for their community.

The war has also had a profound effect on students' sense of national, cultural, and religious identity. For many, the struggle for justice has reinforced their attachment to their Palestinian identity, their culture, and their religion. A lot of students noted, "This war has made me more proud to be Palestinian. We now understand that our identity is more than just our nationality; it's our survival, our resistance, and our shared history." Similarly, religious identity has become a central pillar for many students, providing strength in the face of adversity. The majority of students declared "Our faith is the only thing that gives us the strength to endure. It's what ties us together as a people and helps us keep going despite the hardships." The war has catalyzed a resurgence of cultural pride and solidarity, as students feel that their identity is directly tied to their struggle for justice and survival.

However, while many students have found strength in their national and religious identities, the lack of global action in response to the suffering in Gaza has led some to question the international community's commitment to human values. This despair is compounded by the perception that the Palestinian struggle is largely ignored or misunderstood by the broader international community. As participants stated, "We feel like the world doesn't care about our lives. How can they call themselves champions of human rights when they turn a blind eye to what's happening to us?" This sense of abandonment has led many students to view international justice systems with skepticism and to advocate for a redefined, more equitable global order.

Many students, despite their disillusionment with the world's response to Palestinian suffering, have channeled their feelings into activism, hoping to raise global awareness and bring about change. As media student mentioned, "I now see the importance of international solidarity. The world needs to know the truth about our situation, and it's our responsibility to make sure they do." This desire to educate others about the Palestinian cause and build global solidarity has become a critical aspect of students' sense of justice and identity, with many seeing it as an essential part of their mission to honor the lives lost and continue the struggle for freedom.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The ongoing conflict in Palestine, especially the 2023 Gaza War, has led to profound changes in Palestinian identity and resilience, which aligns with the arguments of several scholars. The concept of *Sumud* (steadfastness), as a central element of Palestinian resilience, is supported by Alexei et al. (2019), who emphasize its role in preserving cultural and national identity during periods of adversity. This notion of steadfastness not only reflects the personal struggle for survival but also fosters a collective identity rooted in the values of perseverance and communal solidarity. Matar (2024) further affirms this, illustrating how the trauma of historical events like the Nakba and ongoing displacement has solidified a shared Palestinian identity tied to anti-colonialism and global resistance movements. These assertions are consistent with the conclusion that the conflict has deepened Palestinians' sense of unity and resistance. This phenomenon mirrors how activists in Syria and Ukraine used identity-based narratives through social media platforms to reinforce collective resistance under authoritarian and wartime conditions, as seen in studies by Bohdanova (2014) and Matveieva (2025).

However, while resilience has undoubtedly played a key role in the Palestinian experience, the psychological toll of prolonged conflict cannot be ignored. The substantial impact on mental health in Gaza, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression, is well-documented in the work of Javanbakht (2024) and Nisa et al. (2024), who argue that the mental health crisis in conflict zones exacerbates the already fragile socio-political situation. This aligns with the conclusion that Palestinians' resilience is not simply a matter of personal fortitude but also of collective coping strategies supported by mental health frameworks. The growing integration of political consciousness into mental health care, as suggested by Veronese and Kagee (2024) and Rockowitz et al. (2024), is a crucial response to this, providing a culturally responsive approach to address the psychological needs of Palestinians while fostering community empowerment and resistance. Comparable challenges have been observed in Syria, where the fragmentation of online resistance movements—outlined by O'Callaghan et al. (2014)—suggests that psychological resilience is deeply affected by the complexity of wartime communication and identity management.

The shifting aspirations of Palestinian youth, as described in the conclusion, also resonate with findings from Roy (2000), who notes that crises often prompt Palestinians to reevaluate their goals, shifting focus from long-term ambitions to immediate survival. This sense of defeat and hopelessness, especially in Gaza, is echoed in Jabali, Sleem, et al. (2024), who highlight the decline in Palestinian youth's faith in Western ideals due to the geopolitical realities of their situation. The transformation in aspirations and beliefs during conflict reflects the broader socio-political shifts occurring within Palestinian society, as the search for dignity and survival takes precedence over distant goals. A similar shift in youth engagement was evident during the Syrian conflict, where Ahmad and Hamasaed (2015) found that digital tools allowed young people to participate in activism despite oppressive conditions—often redefining their aspirations in the face of systemic violence.

Additionally, the role of social relationships and community engagement in Palestinian resilience is strongly supported by Veronese et al. (2012) and Attard (2019), who underscore the importance of strong familial and community ties in buffering the negative impacts of political violence. This resonates with the conclusion's argument that familial and social networks contribute significantly to emotional support and resilience during times of crisis. However, the conclusion also acknowledges the potential for long-term conflict to strain relationships, a point that aligns with Memmi (2015), who warns that the normalization of violence can escalate domestic violence and disrupt familial dynamics. This nuanced understanding reflects the complexities of Palestinian resilience, where community solidarity coexists with the potential for relational strain. Similarly, in Ukraine, Matveieva (2025) emphasized that grassroots mobilization often emerged from tightly knit social circles, where gender and identity roles reshaped community

dynamics and expanded civic engagement under extreme stress.

In conclusion, the 2023 Gaza War has not only intensified the struggles of Palestinians but has also catalyzed a deeper reliance on resilience and the cultural value of *Sumud* to sustain identity and foster hope. The ongoing conflict, while tragic, serves as a reminder of the strength of the Palestinian community and the intricate interplay between cultural identity, mental health, and collective resistance. As Palestinians continue to face hardship, their resilience offers valuable insights into the human capacity to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity.

5.1. Limitations and future research implications

A key limitation of the current research is its sample size and geographical focus, which may not fully capture the experiences of Palestinians in diaspora or other regions. To overcome this, future studies should incorporate a broader geographical scope, including Palestinian communities in diaspora, refugee camps, and those living in different regions, allowing for a comparative analysis of resilience and identity across these varied contexts. Another limitation is the narrow focus on mental health conditions like PTSD and anxiety, which may overlook other aspects of resilience, such as the role of economic stability or social support. Future research should adopt a more holistic approach by exploring how social, economic, and psychological factors interrelate in shaping Palestinian resilience. Lastly, limited data from Gaza, due to ongoing conflict and restricted access, affects the generalizability of findings. To address this, future studies could use remote data collection methods or collaborate with local organizations and international networks to gather more comprehensive data from Gaza, overcoming access barriers.

Confidentiality measures

Participants' privacy was protected through anonymization, secure data storage, and restricted access to research materials, ensuring confidentiality throughout the study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Munther Saeedi: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Oqab Jabali:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Fakher Khalili:** Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Informed consent

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.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of An-Najah National University (Approval No. Hum. Nov. 2024/23). The research 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.

Funding

No funding has been received.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the ANNU students for generously sharing their time and insights. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and reviewers whose feedback helped strengthen this study.

Data availability

Due to ethical considerations and the need to protect participant confidentiality, interview transcripts are not publicly accessible.

References

- Abed Alah, M. (2024). Echoes of conflict: The enduring mental health struggle of Gaza's healthcare workers. *Conflict and Health*, 18(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-024-00577-6>
- Ahmad, T. R., & Hamasaeed, N. H. (2015). The role of social media in the "Syrian uprising.". *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 4(2), 39–45. <http://jedep.spiruharet.ro>
- Al Nabulsi, J. I. (2023). Reclaiming Palestinian indigenous sovereignty. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 52, 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2023.2203830>
- Alexei, S., Abrahams, E., Berman, E., Khadka, P. B., Klor, E. F., & Powell, J. A. (2019). Mostly deterred: An episodic analysis of the Israel-Gaza conflict. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.3465438>
- Asi, Y., Mills, D., Greenough, P. G., Kunichoff, D., Khan, S., Hoek, J. V. D., ... Hammoudeh, W. (2024). 'Nowhere and no one is safe': Spatial analysis of damage to critical civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip during the first phase of the Israeli military campaign, 7 October to 22 November 2023. *Conflict and Health*, 18(1), 24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-024-00580-x>
- Attard, J. (2019). Perceptions of Palestinian shaheeds: Personality characteristics, religiosity, and family relationships (Doctoral thesis). University of Huddersfield.. <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/35112/>
- Bohdanova, T. (2014). Unexpected revolution: The role of social media in Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising. *European View*, 13(1), 133–142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-014-0296-4>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Diab, A.-K. (2024). Pursuing dreams, confronting paradoxes: Palestinian students in Israeli institutions. *Social Sciences*, 13(6), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13060000>
- Hammad, J., & Tribe, R. (2021). Culturally informed resilience in conflict settings: A literature review of Sumud in the occupied Palestinian territories. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 33(2), 132–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1741259>
- Harazneh, L., Hamdan-Mansour, A., & Ayed, A. (2021). Resiliency process and socialization among Palestinian children exposed to traumatic experience: Grounded theory approach. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 34(2), 88–95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/JCAP.12298>
- Holail, S., Saleh, T., Xiao, X., Xiao, J., Xia, G.-S., Shao, Z., Wang, M., Gong, J., & Li, D. (2024). Time-series satellite remote sensing reveals gradually increasing war damage in the Gaza Strip. *National Science Review*, 11(9), nwae304. <https://doi.org/10.1093/nsr/nwae304>
- Homayounpour, G. (2024). Maternal impossibility. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 25(3), 188–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2024.2379206>
- International Court of Justice. (2024). *Order on provisional measures: Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) (Case No. 192)*. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf>
- Jabali, O., Khalili, F., & Jabali, S. (2024). Political socialization and its impact on psychological resilience and PTSD among individuals engaged with Israeli occupation forces on Mount Sabih. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 8(2), Article 100413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2024.100413>
- Jabali, O., Sleem, H., Ayyoub, A., Saeedi, M., Alawneh, Y., & Ishtaiyeh, M. (2024). Exploring perceived challenges, adoption, and assessment of Western values of democracy and human rights in Palestine in the 2023 war on Gaza. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-60147-x>
- Javanbakht, A. (2024). Gaza's hidden crisis: Adults, children, and generations of psychological torment to come. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2008066.2024.2416824>
- Kayali, L. (2024). Transformative incrementalism: Palestinian women's strategies of resistance and resilience amid gendered insecurity and neoliberal co-optation. *Security Dialogue*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106241226653>
- Matar, D. (2024). *What it means to be Palestinian*. Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755610891>
- Matveieva, O. (2025). Social mobilization in wartime Ukraine: The connection between gender identity, national unity, and societal transformation. *Journal of Gender Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2505558>
- Memmi, S. (2015). Gender dynamics in Palestinian society: Domestic and political violence. In *The politics of violence and gender in the Middle East* (pp. 145–166). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16670-4_7
- Nisa, Z.-u., Talat, A., Khan, S. E., Elahi, A., & Ghazanfar, I. (2024). Navigating mental health challenges in conflict zones: A mixed method literature review. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(3), 2629–2642. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2024.v12i3.2453>
- O'Callaghan, D., Prucha, N., Greene, D., Conway, M., Carthy, J., & Cunningham, P. (2014). Online social media in the Syria conflict: Encompassing the extremes and the in-betweens. In *Proceedings of the international conference on advances in social networks analysis and mining (ASONAM)*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259954228>
- Rantissi, T., Gitis, V., Zong, Z., & Hankins, N. (2024). Transforming the water-energy Nexus in Gaza: A systems approach. *Global Challenges*, 8(5), 2300304. <https://doi.org/10.1002/GCH2.202300304>
- Rockowitz, S., Bayoumi, R. R., Parr, N., Awad, A. G., Altawil, M., & Elmusharaf, K. (2024). Fostering cultural resilience: Assessing the success of a locally engaged and adapted mental health intervention in Gaza. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1390211>
- Roy, S. (2000). The crisis within: The struggle for Palestinian society. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 9(17), 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920008720166>
- UNDP. (2024). Gaza war: Expected socioeconomic impacts on the State of Palestine (Update May 2024). <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-05/2400257e-gaza-war-expected-socioeconomic-impacts-pb.pdf>
- UNICEF. (2023, October 31). Gaza has become a graveyard for thousands of children [Press release]. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/gaza-has-become-graveyard-thousands-children>
- University Network for Human Rights. (2024). Is Israel committing genocide in Gaza? New report from BU School of law's international human rights clinic lays out case. Boston University. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2024/is-israel-committing-genocide-in-gaza/>
- UNRWA. (2024, May 28). Palestine refugees face unprecedented health challenges amid Gaza war: UNRWA annual health report. <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/palestine-refugees-face-unprecedented-health-challenges-amid-gaza-war>
- Veronese, G., & Kagee, A. (2024). Does psychology fail in the face of genocide? Insights about Gaza before and after October 7, 2023. *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijhrh-07-2024-0053>
- Veronese, G., Mahamid, F. A., & Bdier, D. (2023). Transgenerational trauma and collective resilience: A qualitative analysis of the experiences of settler-colonial violence among three generations of Palestinian refugees. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640231175787>
- Veronese, G., Natour, M., & Said, M. (2012). Positive emotions and life satisfaction in Palestinian children growing up amid political and military violence: A pilot study. *The Lancet*, 380. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)60198-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)60198-1)
- Veronese, G., Sousa, C., & Cavazzoni, F. (2021). *Survival and Resilience Among Palestinian Women: A Qualitative Analysis Using Individual and Collective Life Events Calendars*. *Violence against women*, 27(6–7), 900–917. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220914406>