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Bridges and Walls: Coping and Emotional Experiences of Arab-Bedouin Female Students in Israeli Academia Post-October 7th

Haled Al-Said
Kaye Academic College of Education, Israel

Saleem Abu Jaber
Achva Academic College , Israel
Kaye Academic College of Education, Israel

ABSTRACT

Higher education is a crucial pathway for socio-economic mobility, particularly for minorities. The events of October 7th in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza (referred to as "Swords of Iron" in Israeli terminology and "Al-Aqsa Flood" in the Palestinian narrative) exacerbated tensions between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority in Israel, impacting daily interactions in workplaces and academic campuses. This study, grounded in Antonovsky's (1987) salutogenic model and employing a qualitative-constructivist approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), examines the emotional responses, coping resources, and learning processes of Bedouin Arab female students during a period of heightened security tensions. For this study, 28 third- and fourth-year students from three academic institutions were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the personal, familial, and organizational resources that supported them during this challenging time. Analysis of the interviews identified three central themes that aligned with the salutogenic model: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The findings provide actionable recommendations for developing support systems tailored to the needs of Bedouin Arabs and other minority students, emphasizing the role of personal and organizational resources in enhancing personal and professional resilience.

Keywords: Bedouin Arab female students, sense of coherence, salutogenic theory, October 7th events, Swords of Iron War (Al-Aqsa Flood).

INTRODUCTION

The number of Arab students attending academic institutions in Israel has increased steadily in recent decades. However, substantial gaps remain in the integration and academic experiences of Arab students. Arab-Bedouin female students in southern Israel face unique challenges stemming from their socio-cultural background and structural and academic barriers (Abu-Gweder, 2023, 2024a). The events of October 7th and the subsequent Swords of Iron war have exacerbated these complexities, significantly impacting the emotional, social, and academic experiences of these students and their ability to complete their higher education (Al-Said & Braun-Lewensohn, 2024).

This study aims to examine the challenges this specific student population faces through the lens of the salutogenic model, which focuses on resilience and coping strategies. The research seeks to explore the coping mechanisms, support systems, and resilience of these students within the Israeli academic sphere, thus offering a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on their experiences during a period of severe crises.

Accordingly, the central questions guiding this study are the following: How have the events of October 7th and the subsequent war affected the emotional, social, and academic experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in academic institutions in southern Israel? And what resilience mechanisms and support systems have they employed to cope with the challenges?

The primary aim of this study is to explore the challenges Arab-Bedouin female students face in academic settings, particularly in multicultural courses and their interactions with Jewish peers. The research highlights their experiences, including encounters with Jewish students, within the broader context of complex political and social dynamics.

The research is the first of its kind to focus on the academic experiences of this student population during a major national crisis. The findings are expected to provide a foundation for the development of institutional policies to address the unique needs of minority students, to combat institutional exclusion mechanisms and promote equitable and inclusive academic integration. Furthermore, the study will contribute to academic discourse on resilience, agency, and cultural coping mechanisms during crises, offering practical recommendations to enhance the learning experiences of Arab students in Israel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the role of academic education for Israel's Arab minority, with particular emphasis on the Bedouin population in the southern region and specifically female students. Grounded in the salutogenic model, the review delves into coping strategies, support mechanisms, and resilience among Arab-Bedouin students in the Israeli academic sphere during a time of security crises.

Higher Education Among Minorities: A Pathway to Empowerment

For minorities, higher education is a key driver of social, political, and economic transformation. Researchers emphasize that for minorities, higher education is not only a pathway to personal mobility but also a tool for broader

structural change. It provides a unique opportunity to break glass ceilings, achieve equality, and enhance social and political status (Arar, 2017, Alkhalaf et al.,2024).

In the case of the Arab society in Israel, higher education carries a dual significance. On a personal level, it is seen as a means of economic and social integration into the Jewish-democratic state. On a broader scale, it is an important tool in the Arab struggle for equality and cultural recognition (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2012). Studies reveal that the number of Arab students in Israeli universities has increased by approximately eighty percent over the past decade, mainly due to improved institutional accessibility and changes in admission policies (Israeli Council for Higher Education, 2019). Despite this progress, Arab students face numerous challenges in academia, including systemic discrimination, linguistic and cultural barriers, and a lack of institutional adaptation to their unique needs as a minority group (Li et al., 2014; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2012).

Arab Women in Higher Education: Transformations and Breakthroughs

The integration of Arab women into higher education in Israel represents a profound social change. Historically constrained to traditional community roles, many Arab women now view education as a means for personal and familial transformation, challenging gender and social norms (Alhuzail, 2022). This shift stems from various factors, including educational reforms, an increase in the number of girls attending Arab high schools, and the opening of new academic tracks (Haj-Yehia, 2019). Additional influences include enhanced accessibility to institutions, establishing academic colleges near Arab towns, and more flexible admission criteria (Masry-Herzallah, 2021).

One significant barrier to multicultural education in Israel is residential However, Arab women continue to face cultural and social barriers internal to their community. These include opposition to studying far from home, restrictions on employment, and pressures to uphold "family honor" (Al-Said, 2024). Despite these challenges, Arab women have increasingly pursued higher education, initially in fields like education and social work and more recently expanding into health sciences (Alhuzail & Alnbary, 2023; Al-Krenawi et al., 2021).

The Arab Minority in Israel: Historical and Social Context

The integration of minorities within nation-states poses substantial challenges, as discussed in contemporary socio-political discourse. In Israel, which is characterized by a complex social fabric, the integration of the Arab minority is subject to added complexity due to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Halabi, 2016). Comprising approximately 21% of the population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023), the Arab minority in Israel faces persistent disparities in income, education, and employment (Al-Said & Braun-Lewensohn, 2024).

Although formally recognized as equal citizens, Arab citizens of Israel experience various forms of discrimination that aggravate social and economic gaps between them and the Jewish majority (Abu-Kaf & Khalaf, 2019). Arab citizens identify as part of the Palestinian people and the Arab world, yet they are also citizens of a Jewish state in conflict with their national identity (Diab & Miari,

2007). Barriers to higher education for Arabs in Israel include difficulty meeting university admission requirements due to lower high school score levels, age limitations, and language barriers, as Hebrew—the primary language of instruction—is their second language. Moreover, cultural differences become prominent on Israeli campuses, which reflect Jewish and Western ideals, further hindering successful integration (Abu-Rabia-Quder, 2006).

The Arab-Bedouin Community: Unique Characteristics and Challenges
Within the Arab minority, the Bedouin community is culturally, socially, and historically distinct. Mostly residing in southern Israel, some Bedouins live in towns while others live in unrecognized villages or villages at various stages of legalization. The Bedouin population is notably young, with approximately 60% under the age of 19, and an average household size of eight (Al-Said & Braun-Lewensohn, 2024).

Socioeconomically struggling, eighty percent of the Bedouins live below the poverty line. Furthermore, despite resettlement efforts, including establishing seven towns, Bedouin municipalities suffer from severe budgetary constraints. Bedouin towns are ranked at the bottom of Israel's socio-economic scale and suffer from high unemployment rates and low educational attainment. The unrecognized villages, labeled by the state as "illegal dispersals", lack basic infrastructure such as water, electricity, and sewage systems (Braun-Lewensohn & Al-Said, 2018).

Culturally, the Bedouin community is characterized by a collectivist, hierarchical, and patriarchal social structure that prioritizes group interests over individual needs. In this context, higher education is increasingly viewed as a crucial tool for socio-economic advancement.

Arab-Bedouin Women: Between Tradition and Modernization
Intercultural interactions in the Negev have led to significant changes in the status of Bedouin women. Modernization, compulsory education laws, and social transformations have created new opportunities for Bedouin women in education and social integration, such that their numbers in higher education have increased substantially over the past three decades. Initially focusing on fields like education and welfare, Bedouin women have gradually expanded into the health sciences (Alhuzail & Alnbary, 2023 ; Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2019).

For Bedouin women, the journey to higher education is often fraught with cultural sensitivity. Attending an academic institution outside their tribe challenges patriarchal traditions and raises concerns about preserving family honor. Despite these obstacles, Bedouin women have managed to break through barriers, broaden their educational and professional horizons, and drive gradual change in their societal status (Haj-Yehia, 2019).

Integration into Israeli Academia: Challenges and Opportunities
The academic system serves as a critical arena for examining the integration of the Arab minority into Israeli society (Abu-Gweder, 2024b). As the primary and secondary education systems are structurally segregated, academia offers the first opportunity for meaningful interaction between the Arab and Jewish populations. According to recent data, the past decade has seen an eighty percent

increase in Arab students in Israeli higher education institutions (Abu-Gweder, 2022; Abu-Kaf & Khalaf, 2019).

However, universities and colleges are not isolated from the broader social context (Abbas et al., 2018). Tensions between Jewish and Palestinian-Arab populations outside university walls often seep into campuses, affecting relationships among students and between students and the predominantly Jewish administrative and academic staff (Lev Ari & Mula, 2017).

The transition to academia poses considerable difficulties, particularly for minority students (Halabi, 2018). Research has shown that these students experience more intense physical and mental stress compared to their peers from majority groups. They report academic struggles and uncomfortable social integration, sensing an environment of injustice, discrimination, and bias (Li et al., 2014). Such challenges hinder these students' willingness to seek help and share their struggles (Al-Krenawi et al., 2009).

Difficulties of this kind intensify during periods of political and security tensions. Events such as the military operations Protective Edge and Guardian of the Walls and the October 2000 riots have profoundly impacted the learning experiences of Arab students in Israel (Sindiai et al., 2024). During such periods, students report that they find it difficult to concentrate on their courses, feel nervous about expressing their opinions, and often avoid attending campus. They thus exhibit a decline in academic performance, increased feelings of isolation, and difficulties maintaining social relationships (Alzukari & Wei, 2024).

The language barrier is another central issue affecting the integration of Arab students into Israeli academia (Li et al., 2014). Scholars emphasize the importance of linguistic rights as a collective and cultural right and advocate for state support for minority languages in the public sphere. The unique experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students within Israeli academia underscore the intersection of cultural, social, and systemic challenges. Furthermore, these experiences reflect broader dynamics within Israeli society, offering critical insights for creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

Salutogenic Theory: The Theoretical Framework of the Study

Antonovsky's salutogenic theory (Antonovsky, 1987; 1998) serves as the main theoretical framework for this study, which explores the experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in mixed academic institutions during a crisis. Unlike approaches focusing on pathology, the salutogenic perspective offers a unique lens that emphasizes resources and factors promoting health and well-being, particularly in adversity (Sagy & Antonovsky, 2000). In salutogenic thinking, stressors are integral to an individual's life, thus a primary task is to identify and strengthen resources that facilitate effective coping.

At the heart of the theory lies the concept *Sense of Coherence* (SOC), which concerns an individual's capacity to comprehend and manage life's challenges. SOC consists of three interrelated components: the first, *Comprehensibility*, refers to the cognitive ability to perceive and interpret reality in an organized and coherent manner. The second, *Manageability*, pertains to an individual's belief in their ability to address challenges using available resources. The third,

Meaningfulness, represents the emotional-motivational aspect, signifying the ability to find purpose and meaning even in situations of crisis and challenge.

Over time, salutogenic thought has been expanded beyond the individual level. Researchers have introduced the concept *Organizational Sense of Coherence* (OSOC), which examines whether individuals perceive the organizations or institutions they engage with as coherent and supportive systems. In the academic context, a strong OSOC manifests in a campus environment that provides adequate support, understanding, and resources for students (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2015). Studies have demonstrated that a coherent academic environment—characterized by support systems and an inclusive climate—enhances students' capacity to cope with stress and various crises.

The current study extends the application of the salutogenic framework to examine a specific context: the experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in mixed academic institutions in Israel following the Swords of Iron war. The students participating in this study had to endure a dual challenge: first, coping with the unstable security reality, and second, navigating their unique position as a minority group within the academic system during a period of heightened socio-political tensions. Through the salutogenic lens, the study seeks to understand both the students' personal coping resources and the extent to which the academic institutions provided (or failed to provide) a supportive and inclusive environment during times of crisis.

The contribution of this study lies in its examination of the interaction between the students' personal SOC and the OSOC of the academic institutions where they study. Understanding this interaction is critical for developing tailored policies and support practices that may help Arab-Bedouin students maintain and strengthen their coping resources during crises. Furthermore, the study offers valuable insights into how academic institutions can foster a stronger OSOC, acknowledging and accommodating the unique needs of minority groups during periods of socio-political tension.

Research Background

The events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military operation termed Swords of Iron (known in Palestinian discourse as Al-Aqsa Flood) represent a serious crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These events, which resulted in numerous civilian casualties and injuries on both sides, led to an extensive military campaign in the Gaza Strip, ongoing at the time of writing (Elyoseph, 2024).

The repercussions of these events are particularly evident in places such as academic institutions, where students from diverse cultural, social, and national backgrounds converge (Cohen, 2023). Typically representing opportunities for dialogue and mutual learning, campuses now face the task of maintaining academic routines and ensuring the well-being of all students, as highlighted in the literature (Li et al., 2014).

In this context, Arab-Bedouin female students in mixed academic institutions face a complex reality, occupying a distinctive position whereby their academic affiliation is in friction with their cultural and social identities. This intersection raises critical questions about their emotional experiences and the coping mechanisms available to them during this period of crisis.

This study aims to examine these students' experiences and emotions in depth, employing the salutogenic model's theoretical framework. Through this model, the research explores the resources that help the study population cope with the challenges at the individual and institutional levels.

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative interpretive research method, which seeks to understand the experiences and actions of individuals from their perspectives and emotional standpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The study sample includes 28 Arab-Bedouin female students, aged 20-26, enrolled in three mixed higher education institutions in southern Israel: one university and two teacher colleges. Data were collected from third- and fourth-year students during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Research Process

Most interview questions were adapted from Antonovsky's (1987) Sense of Coherence scale and integrated into a semi-structured interview format. This approach was chosen to explore participants' academic experiences, their interactions with Jewish students and faculty, their coping strategies, and there perceptions of the events following October 7 and the Swords of Iron operation . Interviews were conducted from September 2023 to October 2024, covering up to six months post-operation. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was fully and accurately transcribed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary analysis method used in this study was deductive analysis, with predefined categories selected before data collection (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Based on the salutogenic theory, the guiding categories were manageability, meaningfulness, and comprehensibility. The researchers analyzed the data independently and then collaboratively discussed their findings to ensure consistency and depth.

FINDINGS

Exploring the experiences of the studied population, the research focused on three central themes: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The aim was to shed light on the students' unique experiences and investigate how they navigate a complex reality, maintain psychological resilience, and create meaning in times of ambiguity and uncertainty. This section explores how the salutogenic components of the Sense of Coherence reflected in the interviewees' narratives and how they contributed to their coping mechanisms.

THEME #1 COMPREHENSIBILITY – Understanding the Unknown

According to Antonovsky's salutogenic model, comprehensibility refers to the cognitive tendency to perceive the world as structured, orderly, and predictable (Antonovsky, 1998). In this study, the students' experience of comprehensibility was profoundly disrupted. Their sense of order and predictability was replaced by constant feelings of uncertainty, fear, and humiliation

The study reveals the profound complexity of the learning experiences of the Bedouin students during this period. The findings illustrate a daily struggle with physical and emotional challenges as the academic space transformed from a place of growth and development into one of survival. The students reflected on two distinct periods:

Pre-Academic Year Anxiety

Even before the academic year began, students faced intense feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Lila described her inherent fear of attending the academic institution due to her Bedouin identity:

"I was afraid to come to the institution. You can immediately tell I'm Bedouin from the way I dress. I wouldn't feel comfortable walking around alone on campus."(Lila).

Nasreen expressed a similar sense of existential fear regarding her daily commute:

*"*I take the bus to college, but every ride feels like a risk. I'm afraid someone might be lurking near the station or that an irresponsible driver might harm me just because I'm Arab*."*

These feelings reflect not only personal anxiety but also an acute awareness of a hostile environment, perceived as both physically and emotionally threatening.

First Day of School: Peak Emotional Vigilance

The transition from theoretical fears to practical experiences occurred on the first day of school, which marked an emotional high point for many students. Anhar said she was too concerned to attend the first day:

"We started the year with orientation activities and didn't have to come to campus for the first month. I personally skipped the first day because I was very afraid to attend."

Those who did attend faced further challenges. Hoda recounted a humiliating experience at the institution's entrance:

"The guard meticulously checked my bag and looked at me suspiciously. When I told her my lecture was about to start, she responded, 'I don't care; I'll do my job."

Such incidents created an additional emotional barrier for the students, even before they could engage academically.

An Intimidating Campus Atmosphere

The hostile atmosphere extended beyond the institution's entrance, permeating the entire campus. Jewish students walking around campus carrying arms caused a sense of unease and ongoing fear. Rowan described her experience:

*"*There were many gatherings of Jewish students, many walking around with personal long weapons. I don't understand why a student needs to carry a long weapon. He wants to feel safe—but what about me? How am I supposed to feel comfortable and safe when he looks like that?"

This visible presence of firearms conveyed a message of threat, transforming the academic space—intended to be open and safe—into a stressful and alienating environment for these students. The findings demonstrate the disruption to the students' sense of comprehensibility and the emotional toll of navigating such a hostile environment.

A Sense of Alienation in the Classroom

Even within the classroom, the female Bedouin students felt estrangement and humiliation. Alaa shared her initial experience:

"I entered the classroom, which was full of Jewish students arguing. As I walked in, no one spoke; they all began looking at each other as if they had seen the devil!"

Moreover, extreme political statements in class contributed to a sense of alienation. Asil, for instance, recounted:

"A student said, Gaza should be flattened, and all Arabs should be expelled.' Such a person has no place in academia! The student ignored my presence, knowing I was sitting in the same class. Why didn't the college intervene? What would have happened if I had said something similar?"

This incident raises serious questions about the institution's lack of intervention against offensive expressions.

A Sense of Being Disrespected or Ignored

The sense of disrespect crossed boundaries and manifested in three main arenas: communication in WhatsApp groups, campus interactions, and personal

treatment in class. Muna described her feelings following an offensive discussion in a WhatsApp group:

"One day, I saw them chatting about an incident near Rahat (a Bedouin city) where a Jewish soldier was murdered by a Gazan living in Rahat. They wrote very crude remarks about Bedouins. I felt ignored and disrespected, even though they knew I was Bedouin. It hurt, I cried, and I felt like I didn't belong among them."

Rana added a religious dimension to the issue, describing another incident:

"In a class discussion, one of the students said that mosques and places of worship should be demolished, and students should be prohibited from praying at the university."

Feeling Hated and Helpless

The experiences described above reached their peak in moments of blatant hatred and helplessness. Nebal shared a particularly difficult experience:

"Last year, while I was at the university, a student said, 'I hate Arabs; they should all die.' I felt like a minority against 30 students in the class who agreed with him. Nobody silenced him or opposed him. I felt weak, powerless, and didn't know whether to respond or stay silent. I felt insulted, deeply hurt, and I haven't forgotten it to this day."

Discrimination by Faculty

The discriminatory attitude wasn't limited to students; faculty members also contributed to the sense of alienation. Munira recalled:

"Once, I was speaking to my friend in Arabic about a personal, unrelated matter, and the lecturer commented, asking me to speak in Hebrew. Even after explaining that it was unrelated, she insisted, saying she preferred hearing Hebrew."

Salam had a similar experience when a lecturer tried to impose a political discussion on her:

"She asked me about my political opinion on the situation. I said I wasn't interested in politics, but a few minutes later, she asked how the Bedouin society viewed the war. Her cynicism and insensitivity bothered me."

Academic Alienation and Cultural Identity Suppression

The academic environment, which should have been inclusive and open, became particularly hostile to cultural and religious expressions. Maha described the difficulty of performing basic religious rituals:

"The college has no designated prayer space. Every time I wanted to pray, I had to find an empty room. After recent events, it became even harder. I remember once, two Jewish students entered the room and explicitly told me they were uncomfortable with me praying there."

Social pressure led some students to hide their cultural identity. As Nawal noted:

"I don't speak Arabic, even with my Arabic-speaking friends. After recent events, Arabic has become the language of the enemy."

Salam expressed frustration with the polarization and stigmatization:

"I'm tired of how every incident splits students into 'us' and 'them.' When a Bedouin soldier was killed, everyone showed solidarity and talked about 'us.' But the next day, they returned to terms like 'us' and 'you.'"

THEME #2 MANAGEABILITY - Coping Mechanisms and Support Networks

Despite the challenges, the Bedouin students demonstrated remarkable resilience, relying on three main support circles:

Peer, Family, and Institutional Support: Samira mentioned the importance of her bond with peers:

"We started organizing into groups and being together all the time. The fact that we're from the same village and went to high school together made it much easier."

Families were often a complex source of assistance. Huda described active support from her father, a teacher who provided her with advice and tools. Sumar shared how her truck driver's brother ensured her safety by parking near the college to escort her home.

The Students' Dean and Arab lecturers played a pivotal role. Amna shared a significant intervention:

"After someone posted on Facebook a photo of me at the university gate with offensive comments, I reached out to the Students' Dean. They made great efforts and even filed a complaint on my behalf."

The findings highlight the students' coping mechanisms. Their resilience is sustained by dynamic networks of support from their communities, families, and institutions, enabling them to navigate a challenging academic environment.

THEME #3 MEANINGFULNESS - Empowerment and Responsiblity

In Antonovsky's salutogenic model, meaningfulness refers to the tendency to attribute purpose and meaning to life experiences, coupled with the belief in one's ability to overcome challenges through effort and using internal and external resources (Antonovsky, 1987, 1998). For the students at the center of this research, higher education served as a vital space for constructing life meaning, fostering personal growth, and addressing complex challenges, particularly against the backdrop of military conflict.

Education as a Tool for Personal and Gender Empowerment

In general, the students viewed education as a bridge to a secure future, a means to advance and achieve their dreams. Bayan reflected on this sentiment:

"For me, as an Arab-Bedouin woman, higher education is an opportunity to break boundaries. It symbolizes independence and self-fulfillment."

Tikva emphasized the goal of personal and financial independence:
"Higher education is very important for an Arab-Bedouin woman. It helps her become independent, gives her a voice, and improves her overall status in society."

Ghadir underscored the importance of economic independence:

"It's important for me to be financially independent and not rely on anyone. The financial burden on parents is heavy, and I don't want to be another burden."

Nida expressed a pioneering perspective, aiming to challenge cultural norms that she found unacceptable:

"Higher education, for me as an Arab-Bedouin woman, is the key to achieving personal and professional independence. It's an opportunity to challenge traditional perceptions of women's roles in my community. Higher education represents more than just academic achievements; it equips me with the tools and awareness to share responsibilities with men in decision-making. My place is not just in the kitchen but in leadership."

Social Responsibility and Being Role Models

The students we interviewed saw themselves as agents of social change and role models. Huda noted:

"I am a role model for young women. I will complete my undergraduate degree and pursue advanced degrees so that others can see that the sky is the limit."

Ahlam added:

"I believe that Bedouin women should not depend on any male authority or institution. Women have rights, and today, as a woman with two children, I fought against all odds to study. I am a role model for others, and many women can follow suit."

Samira addressed her role in motivating young people:

"Today, many drop out of school—both boys and girls—they've lost hope. Seeing me succeed in academia can boost their motivation and reduce dropout rates."

Gamila described the impact of her education on the community:

"In my community, I can teach children and older women, contributing my part to the community."

Similarly, Walaa commented on the broader impact of women's education:

"Today our society suffers from violence and tensions between families. Women's education can instill tolerance and dialogue, thereby reducing violence and crime."

Growth and Development Amidst War

The interviewees discussed the significance of higher education in light of the war. Nour reflected:

"Following the war, I believe even more in education. Through education, we can influence and advocate for peace and dialogue. An educated woman can articulate these ideas more effectively."

Naama added:

"Education and interaction with Jewish students helped me better understand the complexity of the problem. I can represent my community's voice against wars while being in the heart of the campus."

The presence of students from both sectors on campus fostered a sense of empathy. For example, Nour shared:

"I have a Jewish friend who lost her brother in the war, and I lost a relative in Gaza. We talk about these topics sensitively and understand that there's pain in both communities."

Ruida offered a surprising perspective:

"I see myself as an ambassador for the other side. I tell my family about many good Jewish people and left-leaning professors. It changed my family's perception; they thought all Jews were bad."

Gamila summarized:

"The Iron Swords War had a profound impact on my sense of meaning in my academic and personal life. It made me more aware of the importance of education as a means of building the future, especially during times of growing challenges and risks. I realized that education is my weapon to face the future and create change."

Learning and Self-Discovery

Some students noted that the challenges helped them learn about themselves and how to cope with stressful situations. Miriam shared:

"Despite the complexity of the situation, it gave me a chance to discover my abilities and personal resources. Today, I feel more experienced. It was tough at first, but now I know how to handle it."

Rihann added, describing the institutional support she discovered:

"Now I know who to approach at the college—there's an advisor, a Students' Dean, and a program director from the Bedouin community. I wouldn't have thought to reach out to them in normal circumstances, but now I do."

Camila, a teaching student, remarked:

"I know how to handle prejudice and stereotypes now. I feel resilient. This was a learning experience."

These students' narratives indicate that the challenges they had to cope with resulted in personal and professional growth. They acquired tools for managing stress, learned to identify and leverage personal and institutional resources, and developed resilience against prejudice and stereotypes. While initially daunting, the process transformed into a meaningful learning experience that better prepared them for the future.

DISCUSSION

The study exposes a complicated reality faced by Arab-Bedouin female students in higher education institutions in Israel, especially during times of national crises. Based on Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence theory (1979, 1987), the research uncovers a layer of emotional instability characterized by intense anxiety, fear, and frustration. These stem from the stressful national reality and the research population's unique socio-demographic and cultural characteristics. These findings resonate with previous research by Alves et al. (2021), which indicated

a tight link associating stress and helplessness with demographic and social factors.

The academic space is revealed as a site of socio-political tension, reflecting deeply ingrained power dynamics. Consistent with Levy's (2021) research, the nature of the Israeli campus—marked by the predominant use of Hebrew, the celebration of Jewish holidays, and the emphasis on Jewish-Zionist narratives—intensified the Arab-Bedouin students' sense of being unwelcome guests. This aligns with Halabi's (2018) concept of "present absentees," manifesting as symbolic and practical alienation that exacerbates the students' sense of estrangement.

Drawing on Sindiani et al. (2024) regarding social violence, the study identifies how symbolic and social aspects (e.g., visible weapons on campus, protests and racist remarks by students) legitimize structural violence. The findings reveal that this type of aggression, though concealed within the public sphere of the campus, is identifiable through language, symbols, and the behavior of staff and administration (Sindiani et al., 2024).

Another important dimension indicated by the findings is the impact of academic experiences on the shaping of national identity. Consistent with Erdreich's (2006a) research, the hostile and discriminatory environment pushes students to emphasize their Palestinian identity and minimize their Israeli identification. This trend reflects the depth of exclusion and discrimination experienced in Israeli society.

The racist attitudes described by interviewees in this study echoes earlier findings, such as Hagar's (2016) work on institutional racism in higher education. It is shown to be profound and systemic, rooted not merely in cultural differences but in the perception of Arab students as belonging to an enemy group—a tendency amplified during periods of national tension. This finding confirms Samuel's (2004) indication that the academic space is an arena that perpetuates power relations.

Institutional solutions, such as remote learning, emphasized by Alsaid (2024), proved insufficient for Bedouin students as they deepened cultural, technological, and social gaps. The current study's findings underscore the need for fundamental changes in academic spheres, both structurally and culturally, to foster a more inclusive and respectful environment for minority students.

Resilience and Coping Strategies

The current research indicates that the Bedouin students utilized caution and avoidance in the face of conflict. Such tactics, termed "regulated visibility strategies," are addressed in Saada and Gross's (2019) research, which argued that these strategies enable academic survival while preserving psychological integrity.

Another survival strategy from the findings is adopting a neutral academic identity. Similarly to Gindi et al.'s (2020) research on Arab teachers in Jewish schools, the students we interviewed found that adopting a professional and academic identity helped minimize tensions and focus on their courses. This

identity functioned as a "cultural shield," enabling students to navigate academically while reducing cultural-national friction.

The Students' Dean was identified as a crucial strategic resource, with conflict management workshops and listening sessions representing a holistic support model. However, as noted by Diab and Mi'ari (2007), the effectiveness of these resources depends on the cultural sensitivity of service providers.

Overall, the social sphere in mixed academic institutions is fraught with hurdles. Building on the work of Abu-Kaf and Khalaf (2019), the findings reveal that Jewish dominance creates a profound sense of alienation for Bedouin female students. In response, intra-group support networks serve as mechanisms of defense and belonging, enabling students to maintain their cultural identity within a challenging academic environment.

Surprising Findings and Empowerment

A surprising finding of the study is the ability to mobilize family support, challenging traditional notions. Contrary to previous research by Alsaid et al. (2018), male family members demonstrated involvement and support, breaking traditional gender power dynamics.

Moreover, the research uncovered an unexpected aspect of growth and empowerment among Arab-Bedouin students during national crises. Contrary to expectations, the interviews indicated heightened self-awareness, discovery of internal capabilities, and opportunities for personal renewal. This finding aligns with Ben-Meir and Litvak-Hirsch's (2020) findings on vitality and the need to "be there" for family and community during crises.

Through higher education, students break traditional cultural and social barriers, viewing themselves as agents of change capable of significantly influencing their surroundings. This sense of meaning emerges as a central resilience mechanism, allowing them to transform challenges such as war and conflict into sources of learning, growth, and deeper self-understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

This innovative study presents a thoughtful and complicated narrative reflecting the experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in Israel during the challenging period of the Swords of Iron War. Utilizing a salutogenic theoretical approach focusing on resilience and growth, the research uncovers a multi-layered reality of struggle, coping, and resilience on Israeli campuses.

The findings reveal rooted mechanisms of institutional exclusion, putting students in the position of "present absentees"—physically present in academic institutions but intellectually and culturally silenced. Contrary to stereotypes of weakness and victimhood, the study reveals an impressive picture of exceptional resilience, personal agency, and cultural endurance. The students demonstrate immense inner strength, employing creative and complex survival mechanisms.

The study offers a comprehensive outline for systemic institutional change. Key recommendations include creating a culturally sensitive and inclusive academic environment, developing specific academic adaptations, and establishing dedicated mental and social support mechanisms.

While the study provides valuable insights, several methodological limitations warrant cautious interpretation. The small sample size of 28 students limits generalizability, and the geographical focus on southern Israeli institutions and the narrow age range (20–26) also constrain the scope of knowledge.

Despite these limitations, the study provides profound and essential insights into the academic experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in Israel, serving as a clear call for systemic change to recognize their unique resilience and agency and to create a just, inclusive, and culturally sensitive academic environment.

In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.

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HALED AL-SAID is a senior lecturer and the head of the Educational Counseling program at Kaye Academic College of Education. He also serves as an advisor at the Unit for Teachers' Training at Ben-Gurion University. His research interests include stress and crisis among adolescents and refugees; social processes from a salutogenic perspective; promoting motivation and self-determination among students and teachers; induction processes and motivation among new teachers; and educational reforms in the Bedouin society in southern Israel. ORCID:0009-0008-0428-4481 Email: haled70@gmail.com

SALEEM ABU JABER is the Head of the Arabic Department at Achva Academic College and lecturer at Kaye Academic College of Education. He previously led the Bedouin teacher Education Track and founded the Arabic Language Teaching Center at Kaye College. He is A senior lecturer and researcher in Arabic and Islamic culture, he works on improving teacher training for Bedouin Society in the Negev. His work has earned him respect locally and internationally in academic circles. Dr. Abu Jaber holds degrees from Tel Aviv and Bar-Ilan Universities and resides in Kafr Qasim. ORCID 0000-0001-7059-0278. Email: saleemabujaber@gmail.com