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The Arab Spring: new campus dynamics at Gaza's universities?

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ABSTRACT

This study is a pioneer in reporting about the impact of the Arab Spring at Gaza's universities. It is grounded in 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews which I conducted with lecturers and students at two of the universities in Gaza, as part of a PhD thesis at the University of Cambridge (2012–17). Although the study has benefited from Freire's and Bourdieu's conceptual insights, it remains mainly data driven, giving primacy to the Southern experience of higher education (HE) in Gaza. The article shows that although the socio-political changes in the Arab world had a negative impact on the Gaza HE experience, influenced by the spirit of the revolutions, students felt encouraged to voice their discontent to their universities. Nonetheless, due to educational and political barriers, Gaza students' voices remain a cacophony; they are split between compliance and resistance.

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Introduction

The questions to be explored in this article are: how do educationalists at Gaza's universities perceive the shifting socio-political context in the Arab World, and what current or future impact the Arab Spring may have on the educational context at their universities? This article takes the broad definition of impact offered by Oxford English Dictionary, as 'a marked effect or influence'. The Gaza Strip is part of the 'collective consciousness' of the Arab world (Dabashi, 2012, p. 89), connecting synchronically with its 'broad, powerful, transitional foci of identity' (Khalidi, 1997, p. 171). The Arab world, particularly the close by Egypt, has also played a central role in Palestinian education and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Starting from December 2010, the Arab world has witnessed unexpected revolutions and protests, toppling dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and causing uprisings at other countries. Despite different expressions, this historical phenomenon is internationally referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. Such 'grassroots and home-grown' revolutions (Andersson &

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Djeflat, 2012, p. 5), were mainly carried by the youth, who mobilized social media to create a sense of collective agency, calling for the reform of their governments (Gamson, 2011).

Evaluating the uprisings and their impact on regional and international levels 'varies greatly according to where we come from and the issue on which we choose to focus'(Andersson & Djeflat, 2012, p. 1). Currently, the Arab world remains in a 'transitional period [. . ., and there is not yet] a clear vision of where [the revolutions] might lead in concrete and definable terms' (Pappé, 2014, p. 326). Even in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, which witnessed a relative success of the Arab Spring, 'they are still in the process of political transition with uncertain outcomes' (Çarkoğlu et al., 2019, p. 447; also see Gabsi, 2019).

Despite this uncertainty, the literature indicates that 'the Arab world has entered a new phase in its [. . .] history' (Brynen et al., 2012, p. 301). The shifting socio-political context in the Arab world challenges 'centuries of [Arab] stagnation' that were maintained by Arab dictatorships regimes (Andersson & Djeflat, 2012, p. 19; Dabashi, 2012). These regimes' attempts to domesticate cultural institutions and contain people's awareness have failed (Brynen et al., 2012), as the youth has 'inevitably come to see the world differently from the elderly' (Andersson & Djeflat, 2012, p. 36). The 21st century's connectivity provided the youth with new engaging spaces that fostered a sense of collective agency among those of similar struggles in the Arab world and beyond (Farrell, 2012; Gamson, 2011). The media has also played an important role in making the Arab youth's 'political upheaval and revolution [. . .] circulated, promoted, and took on a multitude of forms' (Kellner, 2013, p. 245).

An Arab Spring? The Palestinian experience

Danahar (2013) suggests that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may not characterize a new Middle East. But, the Arab revolutions proved to have a 'nuclear reaction', spreading from Egypt to other Arab countries (Dabashi, 2012, p. 133). In the worldwide Arab Spring dialogue, there remains not a single study which explored the impact of the Arab Spring revolutions at Gaza's universities. Pace (2013) argues that 'Palestine has been a challenging case for academics attempting to explain the lack of political change in the Middle East' (p. 44). Palestine is an area which has been under occupation for decades, where the uprising experience is common, and where the struggle against Israeli occupation represents 'the ideological struggle of the Arab nationalists against Western imperialism' (Shlaim, 2014, p. 383). Due to conditions of siege and violence, the Gaza Strip remains significantly under-researched (Roy, 1995; Shachar, 2010). Consequently, the Western 'conceptual toolbox on authoritarian resilience and transition to democracy [is found]

lacking when applied to the [Occupied Palestinian Territories] OPT' (Pace, 2013, p. 56). That said, it is important 'to read [the Arab uprisings] in the language that they exude and not in the vocabularies we have inherited' (Dabashi, 2012, p. 63). The shifting socio-political context in the Arab world implies a renewed focus on the individual's voice (Inbar, 2012) and 'bottom up' research (Gerges, 2014), to which this article is a meaningful contribution.

Methodology

The research design used the qualitative method approach, collecting data through 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with male and female educationalists (15 academic staff; 21 students), via Skype from Cambridge. The participants were sampled from two of Gaza's universities, using the snowballing method. Since I am a Palestinian, I addressed the risk of bias resulting from my insider-outsider positionality with respect to Gaza by using a self-interview protocol prior to conducting the study. I also used a power-relations sheet to aid contemplation of possible interactions and the best way to deal with them. I used an interview guide setting out the main themes. Scrivener software was also used to keep a digital journal to document insights or notes from the interview process. I developed a safe storage system. In this article, for example, all the names of the participants and their universities are pseudonyms. Academic participants are referred to as 'Mr/Ms [name] UA/UB', and students as '[name] UA/UB'. For example, Ms Etaf UB is a female lecturer whose first name is Etaf and works at the UB university; Ahmed UA is a male student whose first name is Ahmed and studies at the UA university.

The data was analyzed using the social constructionist-interpretive paradigm, which bridges the gap between the subjective and the objective, as well as allowing the researcher to explain the data creatively, as a shared meaning between the literature, the researcher and the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. I used MAXQDA software to generate codes from the transcribed data. Then, using the traditional sorting and piling method, I arranged the codes into categories of themes for argument. Each included perspectives from both participants' views, which the researcher interpreted analytically in relation to each theme. Unless specified otherwise, words such as 'the majority', and 'most' in text reflect a position that applies to students and lecturers, as both separate groups and together.

Theoretical insights: Freire, Bourdieu, and the Southern experience of HE in Gaza

Retrospectively, this inductive research has benefited from insights available in the work of two theorists, namely those of Pierre Bourdieu on 'symbolic

violence', and in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Although Freire's and Bourdieu's conceptual tools for understanding power-relations overlap in their focus on domination, 'Freire is much more optimistic than Bourdieu' about the role of education in individual and societal transformation" (Burawoy, 2012, p. 111). Combining insights from both theorists, and casting them retrospectively and flexibly on the data, offers a space to benefit from their work, while leaving the 'Southern' experience of HE in Gaza to speak for itself, in its own language (Connell, 2007).

Oppression and symbolic violence

Freire (1996) defines oppression as 'any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person' (Freire, 1996, p. 37). Oppression in the Palestinian context operated on different levels and thus was not the same experience in all situations; it also varied in terms of its depth and power between the participants, for example, between males and females; lecturers and students; educationalists and the university administration. I chose the Freirean and Bourdieusian concepts that can apply to a range of meanings, as landmarks of an oppressive experience:

In this article, I use Freire's 'de-humanization' (Freire, 1996, p. 26) to point out the instances in which the humanity of the participants was distorted (e.g., through the siege, control on their freedoms). This may have taken place softly, through acts of 'false generosity' (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Concepts such as 'fear'; 'duality'; 'self-depreciation'; 'silence'; and 'fatalism' show the impact of this de-humanization on the participants (Freire, 1996, pp. 29, 30, 45, 87,43). The concept of 'horizontal violence' (Freire, 1996, p. 44) is utilized primarily in relation to the Palestinian community in Gaza. I use 'conquest', 'divide and rule' and 'manipulation' to refer to 'antidialogical' actions that aimed to 'impede communication [...] and destroy in the oppressed their quality as "considerers" of the world' (Freire, 1996, pp. 129, 125, 128, 120).

Similarly, I use Bourdieu's 'symbolic violence' to refer to the 'distorting effects [of power] upon individual autonomy and interests' (Swartz, 2013, p. 84), that are so often 'naturalized' based on a practical logic, that triggers 'compliance' as a response (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 89, 471). This naturalization makes 'objective limits become a sense of limits' (ibid., p. 471), justifying one's exclusion, and thus 'reinforce[ing] and reproduce[ing] social hierarchies [... and] inegalitarian arrangements' (Swartz, 2013, p. 84). The concept of 'symbolic violence is corporal as well as cognitive and finds expression in all forms of body language' (ibid., p. 92). This article focuses mainly on the cognitive aspect of 'symbolic violence', indicated through reference to 'naturalization',

'compliance' (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 89, 89, 471), and 'dispositions' (Swartz, 2013, p. 89); symbolic violence 'works only on the basis of [one's] depositions [which makes one] thereby primed for it' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 38).

These concepts of Freire's and Bourdieu's spoke to my data, and allowed a close and critical understanding of Gaza educationalists' voices. Conversely, the data offered a snapshot of educationalists' experiences in which the concepts of these theorists could be in dialogue with each other and with the original data from the Gaza Strip, showing how they may apply to a challenging conflict environment.

Findings

The following is my interpretation of educationalists' perspectives towards the Arab Spring and what current and future impact it may have on the educational context at Gaza's universities. I constructed this interpretation based on my inductive analysis of the data, and with reference to the existing literature and the theoretical insights.

Perspectives on the Arab revolutions

The interviews with students and their lecturers on their perspectives towards the Arab Spring revealed a degree of ambivalence, and pessimism. Regarding whether the revolutions should have happened or not, the majority of the participants acknowledged that the revolutions were motivated by 'the demand for economic opportunity, social justice, human rights, political reform, and above all national dignity' (Campante & Chor, 2012). Nonetheless, at least two participants, Dalal UA and Ms Etaf UB 'feared' that the Arab Spring was caused by a conspiracy; a 'manipulation' by the West against Islam as a religion, or by the USA in support of Israel in relation to its Arab neighbours (Freire, 1996, pp. 29, 128). Amira UB also argued: 'because of what we are seeing nowadays, they shouldn't have happened.' A degree of ambivalence is expected since as Dupont and Passy (2011) explain, 'the final outcome of the [revolutionary episodes] is very much uncertain' (p. 450).

When contemplating the consequences of the revolutions, the overwhelming majority of the participants were inclined to 'self-depreciation' (Freire, 1996, p. 45). Ms Amna UA thought that 'there will be chaos'; Ms Omar UB explained: 'it is an autumn'; and Tamara UB stated: 'the future is dark'. In fact, several writings, with similar pessimism, considered 'the phrase "Arab Spring" [...] a misnomer' (Totten et al., 2012, p. 23). They took 'turmoil, violence, and corruption [...] as evidence [...] of the

immaturity or irrationality of [the Arab and Muslim] population, rather than as a sign of the previous dictatorship's pathologies' (Berman, 2013, p. 65).

Similarly, in the interviews, Gaza educationalists have focused on the weaknesses, the obstacles and the complexities involved in the liberation process. Talal UA argued: 'even if the governments have changed, this might not have an impact'; and Mr Omar UB complained that 'democratic atmosphere does not work for Arabs'. Participants lacked trust in their own Arab governments as well as 'self-depreciated' themselves as Arab people (Freire, 1996, p. 45). This concurs with Freire's argument that 'domination is itself objectively divisive [... and results in] the individual [... being] divided between an identical past and present, and a future without hope' (ibid., p. 154).

To sum up, despite a degree of ambivalence towards whether the revolutions should have happened or not, most participants 'feared' how the Arab Spring events might unfold in the future (Freire, 1996, p. 29). There was also a pessimism that is related to Arab and Muslim people more generally. In his Orientalism, Edward Said has warned that 'to be Orientalized [...] implies Orientals themselves internalizing the dominant Orientalist discourses' about their own inferiority in relation to the Occident – the imperialist West (Traboulsi, 2009, p. 180). Barakat (1993), also argues that not only has 'Western scholarship [constantly portrayed] Arab society as constant and static [... but also] Arab intellectuals have themselves deplored the lack of change and lamented the futility of struggle' (p. 22). The majority of the research participants were 'conservative [... as if they were] lament-[ing] the turbulence of the new era and look[ing] back wistfully to the supposed stability and security of its authoritarian predecessors' (Berman, 2013, p. 64).

The possible current and future impact of the Arab revolutions on Gaza

In this section, I firstly map the impact of the Arab Spring on the Gaza Strip, then explain how the educational context at Gaza's universities has been affected by the socio-political changes in the Arab world. Only a few participants negated any influence of the Arab revolutions on the Gaza Strip, such as Huda UA who argued that 'life is still difficult for people'. Most of the interviewees, lecturers and students, asserted that the turbulent conditions in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt, had affected their daily life. Ms Amna UA said: 'of course, the impact is clear, which is more degradation for Gaza'; and Nora UA argued: 'whatever happens in Egypt affects us'.

The impact on the Gaza Strip

The data from the interviews show that the changes in the Arab world had impacted some of the economic, social and psychological aspects of Palestinian life in Gaza. From an economic perspective, Abdullah UA explained how the economic conditions in Gaza had significantly shifted across the three Egyptian successive governments since 2011:

> In the days of Mubarak, we were living a decent life and the days of Morsi, we were living the best life, but now we are living the most miserable life …

Abdullah's observation is consistent with Dickstein's (2014) view that 'once a relatively reliable arbiter of Gaza–Israel conflicts, and then a supporter of Hamas, Egypt is now defining a new role for itself' (p. 11). According to Hassan (2015), 'the Palestinians factions' alignment with the brotherhood, Sisi's sworn enemy, has brought Egypt's threat assessments [of Gaza] even closer to those of Israel' (p. 170). Al Sisi's 'Egyptian government closed the Rafah border crossing, stopping the flow of goods and individuals that travelled between Egypt and Gaza' (Dickstein, 2014, p. 10). Consequently, educationalists including Khaled UB, have perceived the Arab revolutions causing more 'de-humanization' (Freire, 1996, p. 26) for the Gaza Strip as he mentioned: 'they closed the border; nothing enters to us [. . . .]. The prices increase and decrease based on the border'. Instability and border restrictions created irregularity, 'fear' and a sense of 'fatalism' with regard to the market (Freire, 1996, pp. 29, 43). At least four participants (one member of academic staff, and three students) described Gaza as a prison. Dalal UA, moreover, stated, 'we live as animals- they just open the border and rush through the food for us, and then they close it'. This is in line with Li's (2008) argument:

> Israel now treats the Strip [not as a prison, but] more like a zoo" [. . . where . . .] the concern is how to keep those held inside alive, with an eye to how outsiders might see them [while] the question of freedom is never raised. (p. 1)

From a social perspective, Halima was married to an Egyptian whose family lived in Sinai. Dyer and Kessler (2014) explain that after 'the 2011 revolution [in Egypt], the Sinai [peninsula] has experienced a downward spiral in security' (p. 5). Consequently, 'a series of military operations in the Sinai's northern governorate' were launched by the Egyptian authorities on armed groups (ibid., p. 6). This affected Halima as well as her husband's family who came to visit her but could not get back and stayed at her house for a month when she was a newly-wedded bride. In the interview, Halima also indicated that the relationship between her and her Egyptian husband continued to be good only because he chose to support Palestinians. Also, some of Tamara UB's Egyptian friends have 'started making these Facebook pages to insult Palestinians'. This resulting 'horizontal violence' between Egyptians and

Palestinians have intensified Palestinians' feeling of isolation in Gaza (Freire, 1996, p. 44).

On the psychological level, the Arab revolutions resulted in a dissonant symphony of emotions among Gaza educationalists. Almost all the participants 'self-depreciated' themselves as Arabs (Freire, 1996, p. 45), while stressing their belonging to Palestinianism as if a different national group. In a way, this implies that the old colonialist strategy of 'divide and rule' in the Middle East has worked in the long run (ibid., p. 125). Also, the majority of the participants were convinced that Arab world youth was actually inspired by the Palestinian example. For example, Mr Suleiman UA emphasized: 'we initiated [the Arab Spring] when we had the hasm- [meaning Hamas-Fatah conflict]'. Mr Ashraf UB also mentioned Palestinian initiation of the first and the second Intifadas (uprisings) long before the Arab revolutions (Mr Ashraf UB). (see Pace, 2013). Also, while Mr Riyad UA have shown empathy with his Syrian neighbours as he viewed the Syrian war to be more dramatic than the 2014 Israeli operation on Gaza, Moeen UA conversely argued that the revolutions had in fact pushed other Arabs to empathize with Palestinians when they have experienced similar 'dehumanization' and violence (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Another psychological impact was expressed by Mr Omar UB who worried that the 'political affiliations that happened in Syria [… would] appear in Gaza', bringing them more misery to be added to that resulting from the Israeli occupation. As Akbarzadeh (2015) explains, 'the Arab upheaval has morphed into sectarian warfare, championed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]' (p. 44). According to Alijla (2015), the current difficult conditions resulted in an increased number of Palestinians joining 'ISIS' and 'the Salafi[st] groups [… which are] funded by Saudi Arabia' in Gaza (p. 66). Zelin (2014) points out, for example, that 'jihadists in Gaza/Sinai […] have posted pro-ISIS propaganda' (p. 6). As Omar 'feared' the ramifications of this for Gaza (Freire, 1996, p. 29), he commented, 'we do not want them; we are normal people […]. Our conditions are different from everyone'.

So, to conclude, the Arab Spring has, on various levels, affected the local context in the Gaza Strip.

The impact on the educational context of Gaza's universities

With the Arab revolutions, the siege was intensified on the Gaza Strip, restricting universities' exchange, quality and funding (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Below are examples on these three issues:

Describing the siege, Alaa UB said, 'it is death, death. In fact, death is more merciful'. An intensified siege after Al Sisi's government in Egypt, affected participants' mobility and academic networking, including the attendance of conferences. Ms Jamila UA cancelled three conferences last year because she was not able to cross; and Nora UA described the

situation at her university as 'paralyzed'. The siege also affected students' access to study materials. Also, there has been a 'chronic electricity deficit [in Gaza for 9 years which has] disrupted the delivery of basic services and undermined already vulnerable livelihoods and living conditions'(OCHA OPT, 2015, p. 2). The United Nations (2012) states that 'the cuts affect private businesses and homes, health services, wastewater treatment plants, and schools. Many of these rely on back-up generators' (p. 10). According to OCHA OPT (2015), the 'situation has further deteriorated since June 2013' (p. 2). An intensified siege on Gaza limited the exportation of other sources of fuel from Egypt to fill these generators.

The quality of HE in Gaza has also deteriorated after the Arab Spring revolutions. Mr Ashraf UB indicated that parents have become more 'fearful' of sending their daughters to study abroad even in Arab countries. Johansson-Nogués (2013) points out that 'democratic revolutions [...] constitute a moment of high risk for [... women] as they may become subjects of new or renewed and/or (re) structured [gendered] violence from the state and/or their fellow citizens' (p. 409).

On the contrary, Mr Ashraf UB and Ms Jamila UA have both argued of an 'inward mobility' in Gaza's universities, for example, from Syria. According to Fargues and Fandrich (2012), migration 'from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria have been increasing' since the Arab Spring (p. 3). Jammal (2015) reports that a group of 'Syrians made the dangerous trip across the Sinai and into the Gaza through smuggling tunnels [... where they] have quickly got established in Gaza, setting up businesses and starting families' (no pagination). Mr Zeyad UB pointed to increased enrolment at Gaza's universities, especially on the master's programme: 'there is siege, people are bored, and the economic situation is weak [...]. All this resulted in more opening and licensing of private universities'. Between the years 1993 and 2011, 'the enrolment rate of students in higher education increased by 940 [per cent, with an observed narrowing in] the gender gap' ("UNDP," 2014, p. 4). Also according to United Nations (2012), 'the number of school-age children is projected to increase [... in 2020] by an average of 14,000 - per year' (United Nations, 2012, p. 15), posing further challenges for HE in Gaza.

An intensified siege on Gaza created a financial crisis at these HE institutions. Mr Mehdi UA stated: 'now [...] we do not take a full salary; we only take 70% of it'. Student tuition fees constituted the most reliable source of funding for Gaza's universities. Under a 'de-humanizing' economic blockade, however, students were not able to pay (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Universities have also become less able to afford giving scholarships for students. Samah UA complained that her lecturers were 'unfair' because they tried to 'lessen [students'] marks in order not to give [distinction] scholarships'.

To summarize, the Arab Spring affected the context for Gaza's universities, leaving them frozen into a position of no choice but to operate locally and prioritize immediate needs over quality and prospects.

New campus dynamics? Student discontent and barriers to voice

In this section, I discuss students' discontents and the barriers to their voice at Gaza's universities: Despite students growing dissatisfactions with their HE experiences after the Arab revolutions, the interview data shows that they were at the same time, for and against change. Voice is perceived here as a 'slippery term' (McLeod, 2011, p. 181). It 'is not simply speech [... voice means] identity or agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration; it [... represents] difference, [... and sometimes] connote[s] a democratic politics of participation and inclusion [... it is students'] right (to be heard, to have a say)' (ibid.).

A few protests occurred at Gaza's campuses which the interviewees, students and their lecturers, have classified as influenced by the spirit of the revolutions in the Arab world. The focus of these protests ranged from minor to larger issues. Samah UA commented on one protest in which students were objecting to an increase in UA's tuition as follows: 'it was the first time for the students to complain and [...] to do something against the university [... .]. The university responded to them and accepted what they wanted'. Similarly, Nora UA described this instance of the protest as 'something new, [...] and a sort of a victory' for students. Halima UA, as another example, said: 'I think some lecturers treat me badly, I think I should make a revolution against them'. Halima was not joking, but she ended up cancelling this idea so that she can safely graduate from the university. Yasser UB also reported: 'we were planning a carefully orchestrated campaign [...], but other students were [...] scared to death'. Since this protest was related to a freedom of speech issue, and not to tuition fees, although it happened after 2011, the university did not respond to it.

Using Arab Spring Slogans: The data shows that so often in the protests, students used the same slogans that the youth in Egypt's Tahrir Square used requesting the downfall of Mubarak, especially 'the people want the fall of the regime'. Gaza university students would start their protests by chanting 'the people want ... ', and then add their requests such as 'justice', 'revision of the exams', or a 'new lecturer'. Yasser UB, for example, witnessed it in a campaign under 'the people want mid-term exams'. They wanted mid-term exams, so as not to set for a final exam of the total grade.

In fact, 'there is more at stake in these couplet-slogans than [...] a purely semantic meaning' (Sowers & Toensing, 2012, p. 50). In the Egyptian

revolution, 'the act of singing and shouting with large groups of fellow citizens has created a certain and palpable sense of community that had not existed before' (ibid.). Using slogans collectively also 'satirizes feared public figures' (ibid.). Ms Etaf UB said that 'a group from the University students went calling upon the university's president [. . .] by saying "Irhal [An Arab Spring slogan meaning: Leave]", as they wanted the tuition fees to be reduced'. Surprisingly, none of the students or academic staff participants at the UA mentioned the use of such slogans at their university.

Political Protests in Campus: Almost all the UA and UB participants had either witnessed or participated in campus protests after 2011, some of which were political. According to Halima UA, 'students [went] calling Fatah and Hamas to unite and end the Palestinian separation'. Khaled UB also mentioned that the UB student union organized a sit-in inside the university in which both students and the academic staff had joined, chanting and holding posters. These sit-ins were advertised on Facebook which indicates that the 'young [. . . Palestinian] generation [. . . works] to benefit from a new wave of unifying innovation' to advance political activism (Bracher, 2013, p. 56).

Student political protests regarding Fatah- Hamas unity have not always continued peacefully when they were taken from campus to the streets of Gaza. Tamara UB reported:

> Students went out in [peaceful] protests *maseerat* to stop the Palestinian division [. . .]. But, the [Hamas] policemen [. . .] came and spread the people all around and took the guys who organized these to jail.

According to Sherwood (2011), 'the revolutionary unrest sweeping across the Arab world has spurred [students in Gaza in the 15th March Movement] to try to translate their "Manifesto for Change" into street protests. But they face[d] formidable obstacles' (no pagination). As Saleh (2011) explains, both Hamas's and Fatah's reactions to the 15th March Movement was as follows:

> They 'tried to swim with the tide [. . . to] appear as a champion of unity and national reconciliation. In reality, [however, they] used [their] security forces to undermine the movement's fundamental objectives' (Saleh, 2011; see also Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Hence, Palestinian factions' endorsement of this movement was a 'false generosity', a form of 'manipulation', and 'horizontal violence' towards their fellow Palestinians, which aimed to instil 'fear' in the young people and 'silence' the voices of change (Freire, 1996, pp. 26, 128, 44, 29, 87).

Misapplication: Although students have learnt useful lessons from the Arab Spring, not all of them seemed to implement them favourably. Students have sometimes attempted resistance in relation to minor issues in the educational context. Samira UA regretted that a few female students

who had a reservation on inviting a journalist to the university, because, he was a supportive of Israel in his youth, hold posters in his seminar, saying 'you are not welcome in Gaza'. Ms Etaf UB also complained that students wanted to assert themselves in her class regarding academic assignments: 'if you tell the students that, for example, they will have a quiz, students will burst shouting loudly and in one voice that they do not want to'.

Resisting Artfully and Silently: Unable to change simple things at their universities, most of the students have resorted to passive-aggressive behaviour, as will be discussed soon. On the productive side, Abdullah UA and other students used the art of performing drama as an alternative way to voicing their dissatisfactions with the Palestinian Schism without direct confrontation with authorities inside and outside the university. This consolidates Bracher's (2013) argument that after the revolutions 'Arab people appear to be [...] re-imagining their warrior identity in new guises that promotes peaceful discourse and reconciliation' (p. 36). On the negative side, gossip and murmurs were also how students could express their discontents. Lecturers such as Ms Jamila UA were aware of existing students' dissatisfaction as she commented: 'in fact, behind the lecturers' back, there is bad naming, and other things'. Huda UA also explained that to resist 'silently' is natural for the student body (Freire, 1996, p. 87). Hence, gossip and murmuring were perceived as a way of catharsis; an alternative to action. Nonetheless, Candela (2005), explains that 'murmuring [... should not be taken as] a misbehaviour, but rather a counterscript consisting of a different version of what was seen. [...;] an "exercise of power" ' (p. 198).

To sum up, the Arab revolutions have triggered more awareness of student grievances. Despite students feeling a sense of agency, they often ended up sabotaging and 'silencing' their own voices (Freire, 1996, p. 87). This is consistent with the view of Barakat (1993) who states:

> Arabs [...] have become powerless, [...] alienated from, and within [... their] institutions of learning [... and] excluded from participation in the making of their own futures ... (pp.26-27)

Barriers to voice

Ideally, 'all young people [... should be able] to influence the processes and outcomes of their own education' (Cremin et al., 2011, p. 586). Due to barriers within their universities, students in Gaza 'self-depreciated' their voices. Two of the strongest barriers to student voice were their perception of HE as not being a priority under occupation; and universities' control.

Under the 'dehumanizing' conditions of the Gaza Strip, reforming HE was not seen as a priority. Students' nationalistic 'dispositions' (Swartz, 2013, p. 89) made them 'fear' that revolutionary action for reform would

be counterproductive to Palestinian welfare under occupation (Freire, 1996, p. 29). Nawal UA stated: 'students are supposed to fight over the things which they should fight for; Palestine, Jerusalem, Al Aqsa mosque – not over trivial matters'. Also, Ferial UA, 'naturalizing' educational problems, explained they 'can be found in any other university of the world and so they are not a big deal'.

The second barrier to voice, which is university control, is better explained through an analogy of Palestinian universities as 'mini-states inside the occupied territor[ies]' (Jebril, 2006, p. 76), and the administrations as ruling regimes of campus. In the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, there has been a degree of 'fear' from, and 'silencing' of, students' voice by their universities (Freire, 1996, pp. 29, 87). Mr Omar UB gives an interesting description of the administration's reaction to students' protest:

> The university here does something strange. Administration people would be standing near the windows counting the number of rebellious students [in the campus . . .]. As they reached only 200, the person said, 'Forget about them. Let them go away to hell. They have no value'.

Counting the number of students as a measure of their power reminds us of the scene of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Thus it was 'the occupation of Tahrir Square, day and night, by mass numbers of peaceful protestors [. . .] of an important urban space in the major city that brought down a repressive and tenacious government' (Elshahed, 2011, no pagination). Mr Zeyad UB explained this administration's caution from student mass protests by pointing out that 'if something happens within the university, [. . .] it will spread over to the level of the society'. Because the UA and the UB have alleged political roots, which connects them to competing Palestinian factions, this point is critical. Sampson's (1967) explains that 'the university [. . . could act] as a major vehicle of organized dissent' (p. 1). Hence, the inter-relatedness between the educational and the political context in Gaza makes it important for Gaza universities to 'conquer' its student body (Freire, 1996, p. 129). This is consistent with Freire who argues that the 'existential duality [of the oppressed] may facilitate the rise of a sectarian climate leading to the installation of bureaucracies' (ibid., p. 108).

In fact, 'a sense of agency about one's life is [also] both nurtured and discouraged in and through the educational process' (Mcintyre, 2006, p. 629). That said, such control over students' voice was also a result of an inherited traditional system of education at Gaza's universities. Halima UA pointed out that her university's administration 'don't change themselves [. . . because] the idea [of doing that] is non-existent at [her] university'. Halima's criticism resonates with Boyce's (2003) argument that 'the challenge of successful change is less planning and implementing and more developing and sustaining new ways of seeing, deciding, and acting' (133).

Talal UA also perceived it as a 'fate' for students that they 'won't be able to change the system of [their] university'. Ibtisam added that students who protest against the university risk their marks being reduced by their department as a punishment. But, Educational institutions should be 'dignifying students not degrading them' (Sukarieh, 2019, p. 186). Using a 'carrot-and-stick' approach to control student voice is an 'antidialgoical' practice (Freire, 1996, p. 161). Brynen et al. (2012) similarly notes that prior to the Arab revolutions, 'a plethora of [...] awards were created [by the bureaucratic regimes] to domesticate large swathes of the intellectual class' (p. 289), in order to 'divide' and 'silence' the voices of change (Freire, 1996, pp. 125, 87).

Ms Randa UA argued that her university offers several channels for students to shape their HE experience. Almost all students from the same university perceived the UA's channels of communication to be a 'false generosity' (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Talal UA indicated that except in the case of tuition fees where the university would work to 'solve [the problem] partially or wholly', the administration's response would be 'we cannot change the university's system'. As McLeod (2011) explains, 'the challenge for [...] higher education [... is not] in inciting student voice, but in converting that opportunity into meaningful and practical recognition' (p. 188).

Freire argues that 'culture as superstructure [...] can maintain "remnants" of the past' (Freire, 1996, p. 140). Consequently, the oppressed 'as dual beings [...] accept [...] power which becomes bureaucratized [within their own society] and which violently represses them' (Freire, 1996, p. 140). For example, students 'self-depreciated' their agency and preferred to remain 'silent' about their discontents and accept them as a 'fate' (ibid., pp. 45, 87, 43). What contributed to this was that students' few attempts at protest were frustrated. Tamara UB viewed protesting as 'a big mistake', and Khaled UB explained that they felt as if they 'were just going around [themselves]'. Their failed experiences acted as a deterrent from further attempts to make their voices heard.

To sum up, due to barriers to student voice such as universities' control, and HE not being a priority, students currently remain, as Freire suggests, 'Subjects in expectancy' (Freire, 1996, p. 112).

Conclusion: a 'Cacophony of voices'

The 'Arab Spring has clearly brought a change in the way that young people engage in societal issues, and also in the way governments and public authorities [including HE institutions] view themselves and their constituents' (Andersson & Djeflat, 2012, p. 1). The Arab Spring had an impact on Gaza's universities. Firstly, after the Arab Spring, educationalists experienced a variety of emotions, although they were inclined mainly to

pessimism and 'self-depreciation'. Secondly, the turbulence in Egypt reflected negatively on living conditions in Gaza and tightened the siege further on educationalists and their HE institutions affecting exchange, quality and funding. This also resulted in students having antagonistic attitudes towards other Arabs, including Egyptians. Thirdly, on a few occasions, the students attempted to capitalize on the spirit of the revolution to call attention to their discontent. They held protests and used some of the slogans that were used by the youth in the Egyptian Tahrir Square. Nonetheless, students misapplied the lessons from the Arab Spring to minor issues at their universities instead of calling for basic rights and freedoms; fearing the consequences, they often ended up sabotaging their own voices.

Overall, although the revolutions in the Arab world seem to have triggered more awareness of students' grievances and discontent, these are challenged by the traditional universities' contexts. Because of educational and political barriers, students voices are a cacophony; they remain split between 'compliance' and resistance (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). Students were cautious about testing their voices rather than acting upon them. Talal UA summarized this strategy as follows: 'this is the status quo, so do not oppose [...]. Wait until a change happens, and then change your direction'. Thus, 'compliance' is perceived here as a practical strategy (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471) of resistance. This is consistent with the view of Bourdieu (1990) who argues that 'resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating' (p. 155). Freire also argues that 'those who perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which should accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action' (Freire, 1996, p. 109). Khaled UB stated that for change to happen in Gaza, people need to be self-critical, because 'Allah does not change a people´s lot unless they change what is in their hearts' (a translation from Quran: Surah Ar-Ra'ed: The Thunder (13:11)).

So, what does all this mean in the future for the HE experience in Gaza? Sampson (1967) explains that when students commit themselves to change 'they [can be] the triggers that release [...] a barely tapped reservoir of national energy' (p. 1). A cacophony of voices at Gaza universities showed that students have not reached anywhere near 'boiling point', nor are they likely to reach it in the near future. Sensibly, students were weighing their discontents with the barriers they face in calling for change. The Arab revolutions made them feel even more confused about 'compliance', and resistance. In fact, the contemporary Arab world, more generally, was defined by Barakat (1993) 'as an association of contradictions', and complexities (p. 22). Despite differences, students in the Gaza Strip are part of this cultural context.

How the HE experience will evolve in the future is uncertain. Three themes seem powerful and are likely to influence the experience of HE in Gaza in the coming years: (1) Gaza's universities will continue to struggle in a context of occupation and tradition to achieve a quality experience that is democratic; (2) funding is the main regulator of stability or instability at Gaza's universities that can be used for and/or against students; and (3) the culture of these HE institutions will, albeit very slowly, open up as a result of increased female participation in HE since 2011 (see: "UNDP," 2014, p. 4). The interaction of these themes is unpredictable; therefore, these developments are best looked at as a tray of colour beads in which the beads can be fused in different ways to create mosaic and envision contrasting realities of Gaza's universities in the future.

In the meantime, Gaza universities students remain in a neutral condition that is similar to that of a 'Brown Dwarf', a substellar or an astronomical object that might be classified as either a sub-star or a super planet for it holds some of the characteristics of both. So far, students' conflicting voices make it a challenge to discern whether students' dissatisfaction will lead to reform in the future or their barriers will silence them before they achieve any 'meaningful transformation' (see Freire, 2003, p. 161). Hence, 'in working towards liberation, one must neither lose sight of [the oppressed] passivity nor overlook the moment of awakening' (ibid., p. 46).

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