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Palestine in Egyptian Educational Consciousness After October 7: Between Awakening and Official Stagnation

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Abstract
This research examines the attitudes of university students in Egypt toward resistance, solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and everyday boycott practices, positioning the university as a site of political and intellectual struggle. The main aim is to explore how students navigate political constraints within academic institutions. Through semi-structured Zoom interviews with 48 education students from various Egyptian universities, the study reveals that while political expression on campus is limited by implicit boundaries, students engage in indirect forms of resistance—such as consumer boycotts and cultural symbolism—as strategies to contest political and cultural hegemony. The findings underscore the role of higher education in fostering political consciousness and symbolic resistance, affirming that universities remain contested ideological spaces where youth creatively engage with national and regional political realities.
Keywords: Academic freedom, national identity, Palestinian issue, political education, symbolic resistance

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث مواقف طلاب الجامعات في مصر تجاه المقاومة، والتضامن مع القضية الفلسطينية، وممارسات المقاطعة اليومية، مصورًا الجامعة بوصفها ساحة للنضال السياسي والفكري. يتمثل الهدف الرئيسي للدراسة في استكشاف كيفية تفاعل الطلاب مع القيود السياسية المفروضة داخل المؤسسات الأكاديمية. وتكمن أهمية البحث في إبراز دور التعليم العالي في تعزيز الوعي السياسي والمقاومة الرمزية لدى الشباب. بالاعتماد على مقابلات شبه منظمة أُجريت عبر تطبيق "زووم" مع 48 طالبًا جامعيًا من جامعات مصرية مختلفة، كشفت النتائج أن التعبير السياسي داخل الحرم الجامعي تحكمه حدود غير معلنة. ومع ذلك، يلجأ الطلاب إلى أشكال غير مباشرة من المقاومة – مثل المقاطعة والرمزية الثقافية – لمواجهة الهيمنة السياسية والثقافية. ويخلص البحث إلى أن الجامعات لا تزال تمثل فضاءات أيديولوجية متنازعًا عليها، ينخرط فيها الطلاب بأساليب إبداعية لمواكبة الواقع السياسي.
كلمات مفتاحية :الحرية الأكاديمية، الهوية الوطنية، القضية الفلسطينية، التعليم السياسي، المقاومة الرمزية.

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Introduction

On October 7, 2023, a bloody confrontation took place between the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli occupation. This marked a radical turning point in the collective Arab consciousness and in the renewed political presence of the Palestinian cause after years of official marginalisation and popular obscurity. The event was not merely military; it unleashed a tremendous emotional and cultural energy that restored the centrality of Palestine as a cause of human liberation.

In Egypt, society responded to this event with mixed reactions. Official discourse remained silent or reserved, while broad segments of the population—led by university students—moved to express clear solidarity with Palestine. Reactions were not limited to fleeting sentiment or digital posts; they manifested in symbolic protest behavior, the most prominent of which was the launch of broad economic boycott campaigns targeting companies that support the occupation, attempting to transform solidarity into a daily practice. In this context, Egyptian universities emerged as an incubator for an alternative consciousness emerging outside of decision-making circles. University students redefined their relationship with the Palestinian cause, not as a moral and existential test related to the meaning of justice, freedom, and dignity. This interaction recalled the history of the Egyptian student movement, albeit in new forms appropriate to a more complex and monitored digital environment.

The calls for boycott were not merely slogans; they were embodied in digital publications, awareness campaigns on campus, poster designs, and the circulation of lists of products and companies supporting the Zionist entity. University students were able to create decentralised solidarity networks that transcended traditional political affiliations, indicating the rise of an independent consciousness that distanced itself from the discourse of the state or official institutions.

In contrast, the official educational discourse—as reflected in curricula and public educational activities—was characterised by almost complete silence regarding the events in Palestine. Some university administrations even refrained from allowing any manifestations of solidarity on campus, creating a clear gap between the vivid awareness in students' minds and the static discourse in state educational documents. This scene presents us with a stark paradox: Young people are rediscovering Palestine as part of their collective consciousness, while the educational system continues to produce content that ignores this consciousness or suppresses its manifestations. Here, the tense relationship between education as a tool for control and containment, and education as a lived experience of political and moral engagement is revealed.

In light of this contradiction, it becomes imperative to listen to what universities are saying in their quiet voices and what their students are doing outside the classroom. Understanding this youth movement is not merely a matter of observing an emotional state, but instead of reading into a more profound transformation taking place at the heart of the relationship between knowledge, identity, and worldview.

To explore these dynamics, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is the political awareness of the Palestinian cause formed among university students?
2. What forms of daily practices express student solidarity with Palestine on campus?
3. To what extent are students aware of institutional constraints on expression and

resistance?

4. What is the role of political education and national identity in shaping student perspectives?
5. How is the university space symbolically constructed by students in relation to conflict and resistance?
6. How do solidarity and boycott practices function as everyday resistance?

This research is significant because it sheds light on the re-politicisation of the Palestinian cause within Egyptian academic spaces and highlights the university as a site of ideological conflict and youth resistance. It contributes to the understanding of how young people reshape national and political identity in response to global and regional events, and how these shifts confront or bypass institutional frameworks. The research also offers insights into the intersection of political education, symbolic resistance, and academic freedom in contemporary Egypt.

Literature Review

Main Education as a Tool of Domination and the Reproduction of Silence

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most prominent theorists in understanding the relationship between education and power. He believes that the educational institution does not merely play an epistemological or professional role, but instead plays a central role in reproducing dominant social structures through what he calls "symbolic violence," that is, a hidden form of oppression exercised through seemingly nonviolent means, such as language, curricula, assessment, and public educational discourse (Dooley & Mu, 2023).

This symbolic violence is exercised in the educational space by presenting the dominant culture—that is, the culture of the dominant groups—as "neutral," "rational," and "normal," while marginalising alternative, marginalised, or resistant cultures. Thus, education becomes a tool for legitimising the existing system by producing generations who accept their assigned position in the social structure without radical questioning (Jenkins, 2025).

According to Bourdieu et al. (2023), school (and university) is not a neutral arena, as official ideologies assume, but rather a space for the reproduction of class and cultural inequality, where the advantage is given to those who possess what he calls "cultural capital" appropriate to the dominant culture—that is, the language, tastes, and thought patterns of the dominant class. From this perspective, student failure or silence is not viewed as an individual or neutral phenomenon, but rather as the product of an entire structure that regulates who is allowed to speak and what is allowed to be said.

In the Egyptian context, this idea is evident in the way university education is administered, where public discourse on campus is regulated according to the state's orientation, and any expression that deviates from the institutional framework is confiscated. The Palestinian issue is a stark example of this: despite its historical depth in the Egyptian conscience, its representation in official university curricula and activities is almost nonexistent, or presented with extreme reservations, producing a consciousness devoid of any political or liberation dimension.

This systematic silence is not merely a result of negligence; rather, it is part of the process of reproducing "official consciousness," which promotes concepts such as "neutrality," "developmentalism," and "non-interference" as rational principles, while classifying any

popular or student initiative in solidarity with Palestine, or any critical political stance, as a threat to stability or a deviation from the norms.

Academic assessment itself contributes to the consolidation of this system, as texts and interventions that adhere to the official framework are rewarded. In contrast, voices that attempt to question this framework are marginalised, ignored, or even punished. Thus, the university space is transformed into a space for "reproduction of silence," where students are trained to think within certain limits, not to break free from them. Hence, any student solidarity movement—such as the boycott campaigns after October 7—represents, in Bourdieu's view, a breakthrough in the hegemonic process, because it expresses an attempt to redefine the self and reality outside of official discourse. In these cases, the student is no longer a consumer of knowledge but rather a political actor who reshapes the symbolic and social fields within which they operate. This is what makes youth solidarity movements, even if they appear simple or limited, profoundly theoretical: they resist symbolic violence not with weapons, but with counter-symbolic action, that is, by producing an alternative discourse and new practices that reconstruct consciousness on foundations other than those promoted by the establishment.

The Educational Institution as a Mechanism for Producing Obedience

In authoritarian contexts, the educational institution's role extends beyond merely transmitting knowledge to shaping patterns of thought and behavior that serve the stability of the existing political regime. This is achieved through an integrated structure of curricula, directed activities, and administrative controls, which shape what can and cannot be thought about, as well as what is acceptable or unacceptable in the university public sphere (Fallace, 2018).

The primary tools for shaping subordinate consciousness are educational curricula, which are presented as "objective" and neutral subjects, in reality, they reflect precise ideological choices regarding what should be taught and what should be marginalized (Besley & Peters, 2020); In many cases, political concepts with a liberation dimension, such as colonialism, resistance, universal justice, or international solidarity, are absent or reduced to rootless constructive concepts (Faour & Boujaoude, 2024); In the Palestinian case, for example, many curricula do not refer to the Nakba, the Zionist project, the Palestinian struggle, or present them within the framework of a "ended historical era." University activities, which are supposed to be a free space for the development of thought and initiative, are often subject to direct or indirect security supervision and directed toward specific areas such as entrepreneurship, development, or national celebrations, while completely excluding controversial issues or those expressing political solidarity. Thus, activities transform from a space for free action into a bureaucratic extension of the curriculum, where the regime's values are reproduced rather than undermined.

Institutional and administrative restrictions also play a role in controlling student activism. Through complex systems of licensing, permits, and sanctions, political expression becomes costly, even dangerous, pushing students toward self-censorship and avoiding anything that might be perceived as "politicized" (Sant, 2021); Obedience here results not only from direct repression but also from the production of a culture of caution and discipline.

Under this structure, subservient consciousness is reproduced on two levels: a distorted cognitive consciousness, unaware of liberation struggles or contemporary political contexts, and a psychological consciousness fraught with fear of expression or action. Students graduate

knowing how to write a research paper or give a presentation, but are hesitant—or even uninterested—in engaging with issues such as occupation, colonialism, or social justice.

This framework only produces a politically subservient generation and also besieges any free youth initiative that might suddenly emerge. As soon as signs of an alternative consciousness emerge—as happened after October 7—the system is called upon with all its tools to stifle the momentum, whether through direct control, demonising, trivialising, or neutralising political action within "licensed activities."

However, despite this complex engineering of consciousness, the educational institution is not an impregnable fortress. At critical moments, when the legitimacy of official discourse is shaken—as in major wars or public violations of justice—gaps appear in the wall, and students begin to reclaim their voices and generate new meanings that challenge what the university has taught them or attempted to obscure.

Education as a Practice of Freedom

Paulo Freire is one of the most influential thinkers in the field of critical pedagogy. In his most famous book, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970), he offered a radical critique of the traditional model of education, which he described as the "deposit model," in which the student is viewed as an empty vessel receiving ready-made knowledge dictated by the teacher. In this model, the learner is not required to think, question, or interact, but rather to memorise, repeat, and obey. This makes education a tool for reproducing oppression rather than liberating consciousness.

In contrast, Freire proposed an alternative model he called "education as a practice of freedom," in which the learner is a partner in the educational process, treating knowledge not as ready-made content, but as a means of understanding and transforming the world. In this model, education is not separated from social and political life; instead, rather connected to it, becoming a tool for understanding injustice, analysing power, and striving for justice. In this way, education becomes a process of human transformation, not a training in subjugation (Keyes, 2024); This emancipatory approach is based on what Freire calls "critical consciousness," meaning the ability to critically and analytically perceive the reality in which one lives, allowing one to see its structural and historical dimensions, rather than accepting it as an unchanging fate (Freire, 2021); Critical education does not seek to adapt to injustice, but rather to question and transcend it. This requires an environment that allows students to engage in dialogue, participate, differ, and produce meaning (Yancy, 2019).

In the Egyptian and Arab university context, Freire's theory represents a call for a profound revision of the prevailing logic in lecture halls, where the educational process is often reduced to the indoctrination of information, the cramming of curricula, and the sanctification of official texts, with a near-total absence of debate, questioning, and engagement with societal issues. In such a context, it becomes natural for solidarity with Palestine or with matters of social justice to be viewed as a deviation or "unacceptable politicization," rather than a natural extension of critical education. Freire asserts that educational neutrality is a dangerous illusion because all education is either on the side of hegemony or on the side of liberation, and there is no third position. Therefore, claiming neutrality in oppressive contexts practically means supporting the status quo and perpetuating silence. Hence, critical education becomes, in essence, a political act, but it is neither partisan nor propagandistic. Instead, it seeks to enable individuals to read their reality, engage with it, and work to change it.

This vision offers tremendous potential for reimagining the role of universities as laboratories of awareness and action. When a question such as "What is my relationship to Palestine?" is posed, it is not answered by instructions from outside, but rather within discussions between professors and students, in which they question history, justice, complicity, and the individual and collective potential for symbolic and material resistance.

Adopting Freire's principles in the Arab context does not mean transposing his theory verbatim, but rather drawing inspiration from its spirit, questioning local realities, and striving to build educational models that make the university a place of inquiry, reflection, and solidarity, not submission and separation. In moments of political tension, such as now with the escalation of aggression on Gaza, critical pedagogy represents a last resort to restore meaning to education and transform it into a tool for symbolic resistance against normalisation, complicity, and indifference.

Critical and Liberation Education as an Alternative

Paulo Freire believes that liberation begins with "naming the world," that is, possessing the ability to see reality and name it in its actual terms, not as the authorities want it to be seen or described. When occupation is defined as a "conflict," or resistance is described as "violence," language has become a tool of oppression. Naming the world as it is the first step toward changing it (Vandenbroeck, 2020).

In this regard, the actions of university students who insist on calling what is happening in Palestine "occupation," "genocide," and "ethnic cleansing," rather than "conflict" or "tension," constitute a liberating act par excellence. These students are not merely re-describing the event; they are also deconstructing the official discourse that seeks to normalise the crime or to transform it into a distant matter, neither deserving of outrage nor calling for action.

This desire to name the world and decode its symbols is evident in student boycott initiatives, whether by refraining from purchasing products that support the occupation or by pressuring university administrations to sever ties with companies or institutions involved in supporting the Zionist entity. This type of practice is not simply summed up as "ethical consumption," but rather expresses a critical awareness that views the economy, culture, and education as arenas for political conflict.

In this sense, the boycott campaign becomes an educational tool in itself, as students discover that their small actions are not isolated from the global system, and that they are not merely recipients of decisions, but relatively active agents in shaping an alternative discourse. They also learn, through practice, that solidarity is not a slogan, but rather an epistemological, moral, and political commitment.

Naming the world does not mean exposing political falsehood, but rather deconstructing the administrative and institutional language that labels student action as "inappropriate," "politicised," or "violation of regulations," turning liberatory action into a crime and silence into commendable obedience. Here, deconstructing discourse becomes part of the daily resistance against the silencing of thought on campus. What's striking is that many of these initiatives did not come from an elite student body, but rather from ordinary students who began by asking simple questions: "Why do we teach Western subjects that celebrate modernity while Gaza is being bombed? Why do we boycott the occupation in slogans and normalise with it in the marketplace?" These questions, despite their apparent simplicity, constitute powerful entry points into what Freire calls "transformative critical consciousness."

Hegemony and Resistance in Institutions: A Gramscian Reading of the University and Politics

The theory of cultural hegemony, formulated by Antonio Gramsci, is one of the most influential intellectual tools for understanding how modern power is exercised without direct coercion. According to Gramsci, oppressive regimes do not rely on force alone, but instead establish their hegemony through "civil society"—through schools, the media, religion, and culture—where they produce worldviews that make the existing order appear normal, even unthinkable (Carroll, 2024).

In light of this perspective, educational institutions, particularly universities, can be viewed as sites for reproducing hegemony. Curricula, disciplines, academic discourse, and bureaucratic procedures do not operate in isolation from power; instead, they contribute to the production of what Gramsci calls "consensus," that is, shared perceptions that justify the status quo, neutralize critical thinking, and transform education into a tool for obedience and compliance (Mayo, 2024); However, Gramsci (2021) does not view institutions as closed spaces controlled by authority, but rather as tense, dual sites, susceptible to resistance. Within these same spaces that produce hegemony, the seeds of dissent grow, where what he calls the "organic intellectual" emerges: the individual or group that engages with its reality and proposes an alternative discourse, aligned with marginalised and oppressed groups.

From here, we can understand the growing role of university students who refuse to remain silent regarding the aggression against Palestine, not as mere moral actors, but as cultural resistors within spaces that attempt to render them neutral or normalised. These students, from their position within the university, embody symbolic resistance to hegemony through boycott campaigns, statements, sit-ins, and intellectual interventions that expose the contradictions of institutional discourse.

The university, in this context, becomes an arena of conflict between official hegemony, which reproduces "moderation" and "neutrality," and resistance, which exposes symbolic oppression and institutional complicity. According to Gramsci, this conflict is not resolved by force alone, Still through a "war of positions," that is, by occupying symbolic and cognitive spaces, changing the dominant language, and proposing analytical and value-based alternatives.

This approach also provides an understanding of the reactions of university institutions when confronted with student activism in solidarity with Palestine. Instead of dialogue, some administrations resort to reprimanding students, imposing censorship, and demonising political expression. This is not because they fear violence, but because they realise that hegemony is threatened when individuals begin to name the world outside its language.

Thus, understanding the relationship between hegemony and resistance within educational institutions in light of Gramsci allows us to accurately analyze the dynamics taking place in Egyptian and Arab universities, especially in light of major political transformations such as the ongoing genocide in Palestine, where the limits of silence and speech, compliance and dissent, are being tested in the simplest and most profound details of academic life.

From Deconstructing Hegemony to Exercising Freedom

The above demonstrates a creative convergence between Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire. The outlines of a liberation project emerge that views education as more than just the indoctrination of knowledge; rather, it represents an arena for intellectual and political struggle, where the discourse of hegemony clashes with the possibilities of conscious resistance.

Gramsci highlights how hegemony is managed within institutions, while Freire offers ways to deconstruct it through critical awareness and collective practice.

In this context, the university student is a historical agent capable of naming the world, questioning curricula, and exposing the invisible alliances between the educational institution and centers of power. He is the "organic intellectual," as Gramsci envisioned him, and the "liberated subject," as Freire dreamed of it.

When this student dares to refuse silence on Palestine, he not only aligns himself with a humanitarian cause but also declares his departure from the hegemony of official discourse and practices an act of liberation within an institution designed to reproduce subordination. Here, solidarity with Palestine becomes a living test of the concepts of "consciousness" and "freedom," not as theoretical values, but as daily actions that transform the self and the world.

While universities—as part of the apparatus of domination—attempt to depoliticize students and distance them from major issues, they are politicizing the university space, transforming it from a neutral space into a site of engagement with injustice, supported by critical thinking that transcends borders and draws on global traditions of resistance and freedom.

Student Movements and the University as a Political Space: A Critical Reading in the Egyptian Context

In critical thought, the university is more than just an educational institution; it is a political and cultural space where social and symbolic relations are reshaped. Antonio Gramsci believes that educational institutions contribute to the production of "cultural hegemony" by consolidating dominant values and ideas, making them an arena for ideological conflict between the government and society.

In Egypt, universities have played a significant role in political activism, especially during periods of significant transformation. Zabad (2019) pointed to universities as a center of student activism since the 1960s, when widespread protests against government policies took place, such as the 1968 demonstrations that demanded an investigation into the causes of the defeat in the 1967 war, and the 1972 demonstrations that criticized the leadership's delay in deciding to go to war to reclaim Sinai.

Zayed et al. (2016) showed that student activism in Egypt expressed growing political awareness among young people. Especially with the escalation of political repression after 2013, the student movement faced significant challenges. Strict restrictions have been imposed on political activity within universities, and many student activists have been arrested.

Amnesty International's (2025) report noted the arrest of some Egyptian students in 2024 for participating in solidarity campaigns with Gaza, reflecting the state's continued repression of dissenting voices even within educational institutions.

Despite these challenges, some student movements have continued to express their political positions in various ways, such as organising cultural events, writing critical articles, and using social media to raise awareness. These activities demonstrate that the university remains a space for symbolic struggle, as students seek to redefine their role and place in society.

Fahmy and Faruqi (2017) suggest that student activism can be an indicator of broader social and political changes. When students mobilise to demand freedom and justice, they express the aspirations of an entire generation seeking a better future. Thus, understanding the

dynamics of student activism contributes to a deeper understanding of the transformations taking place in Egyptian society.

Shaping Political Awareness in Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play a role in shaping individuals' cognitive and political awareness. Their impact is not limited to the transmission of information, but extends to shaping their perceptions of belonging, citizenship, and the relationship with authority. Curricula and educational discourse shape a particular conception of the "good" citizen as defined by official policies.

In Egypt, this role is evident in courses such as "National Education," which aim to foster a sense of belonging. However, they are often presented in a style that relies on memorisation and the repetition of slogans, reducing their effectiveness in developing critical political awareness. They lack concrete models of community engagement or real-life examples of civil and political struggle (Elsayed, 2021).

Ghanem's (2022) study indicates that educational curricula tend to focus on symbols and discipline, while ignoring the lived contexts in which students live, ultimately producing a formal awareness of nationalism that is not connected to reality and does not encourage action and participation. In contrast, Abu Khreis's (2020) study indicates that many young people begin to develop their political perceptions outside the formal educational system. Through interaction with digital platforms and regional issues such as the Palestinian cause, new spaces for awareness are created that encourage them to question what they have learned and push them to search for a deeper meaning of identity and belonging.

The experiences students undergo within universities demonstrate that political education goes beyond the confines of the curriculum. Any prohibition of discussion or exclusion of a sensitive issue sends implicit messages that influence students' perceptions of their role and the limits of their freedom. Thus, political awareness is formed through imposed silence, just as it is formed through available speech (Goher, 2023).

Ahmed's (2025) study confirms that with the growing use of social media and the proliferation of knowledge sources, young people today are exposed to experiences that open up a different horizon for understanding politics and national identity. This creates alternative paths for political education that are not linked to formal education, but are more vital and influential in students' understanding of their world and justice issues.

Solidarity and Hidden Resistance

Political anthropologist James Scott is one of the most prominent figures who explored the concept of hidden resistance in societies subject to political, economic, or cultural domination. In his famous book, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Peasant Resistance, Scott developed the concept of "hidden transcripts," referring to the everyday, silent forms individuals adopt in the face of oppression (Coskun, 2020).

Scott distinguishes between what he calls the "public transcript," the discourse and behavior through which individuals publicly express themselves before authority, and the "hidden transcript," the discourse and practice that is not spoken publicly but is practised among those who share the same oppression. These hidden transcripts are fertile ground for the symbolic dismantling of authority through irony, postponement, ignoring, interruption, whispering, and symbolism (Samuel, 2020).

Hidden resistance arises in environments where direct political expression is prohibited or punished. Therefore, this resistance manifests itself in small behaviors with a profound cumulative effect, such as refusing orders without direct challenge, sarcastically altering the official slogan, or reversing the everyday use of language and symbols to serve an alternative discourse (Nagel, 2025).

This resistance pattern is also evident in Egyptian universities in student boycott campaigns, whether of products, events, or institutions directly or indirectly linked to colonial or authoritarian forces. These campaigns, despite their apparent simplicity, entail an ethical and political stance that goes beyond consumption, transforming them into a symbolic practice that declares the refusal of submission and complicity.

Through the boycott, students express their solidarity with Palestine and reject normalisation policies or institutional complicity with the occupation. Refraining from purchasing a product, withdrawing from an event, or publishing an alternative menu for ethical consumption becomes a political act that sends a collective message: "We know, and we will not be silent."

These practices are not limited to the economic aspect; they extend to language, clothing, visual symbols, and even daily interactions on campus. Some students wear the keffiyeh, write small slogans on their notebooks, or use solidarity phrases in their conversations, transforming the body and space into vehicles of resistance.

The power of these actions lies in their being exercised from within the system, not from outside it. They do not directly challenge authority, but rather recode reality and produce a counter-narrative in the margins, quietly growing until it confuses the center of power. As Scott says, silence is sometimes more eloquent than speech, and evasion is smarter than confrontation.

Methods and Materials

This research employed a qualitative research approach, which is most suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as student resistance, solidarity with Palestine, and symbolic cultural practices within university spaces. Rather than quantifying behaviors or attitudes, the qualitative approach seeks to understand the underlying meanings, motivations, and socio-political contexts that shape student actions. A descriptive analytical design was adopted, supported by case study techniques to provide an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences.

Participants

The research targeted a purposive sample of 48 students enrolled in faculties of education at three Egyptian universities: October 6 University, Arab Open University, and Alexandria University. These institutions were chosen to reflect geographical and cultural diversity. The choice of the faculties of education was deliberate for the following reasons:

- Students in these faculties are typically more attuned to issues related to education, identity, and citizenship.
- As future educators, their views hold long-term significance for the educational system.
- Students from these faculties have been notably active in recent solidarity and boycott movements on university campuses.
- Participants were selected through contacts with student unions, volunteer groups, and peer recommendations, ensuring a range of perspectives across academic levels and

social backgrounds.

Research Instruments

The main instrument used was semi-structured interviews, designed to provide participants with the freedom to narrate their experiences in their own words, while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews. The interview questions focused on:

- Students' attitudes toward the Palestinian issue.
- Daily boycott practices.
- Symbolic expressions of solidarity.
- Perceptions of university policies and restrictions on political expression.
- This format allowed for both structure and flexibility, enabling deeper insights into students' subjective experiences.

Research Procedures

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the limited freedom of expression on many campuses, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. This method provided logistical convenience, ensured a greater sense of psychological safety, and encouraged openness among participants.

- Interview invitations were sent after initial contact was established through relevant student networks.
- Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis.

The number of participants (48) allowed the research to strike a balance between depth of understanding and diversity of voices, covering variations in academic level, social background, and personal engagement with the Palestinian cause.

Discussion

In this section, the research questions are answered as follows:

1. How is the political awareness of the Palestinian cause formed among university students?

Political awareness of the Palestinian cause among university students is primarily formed outside of classrooms and formal curricula, particularly through the internet and social media. Most students confirmed that their awareness was formed by following news, images, and videos coming from Palestine, which was a turning point that prompted them to rethink the issue and attempt to understand its background.

Some students also had prior awareness stemming from family, personal interest, or through mosques and religious sermons that linked the issue to holy sites, but this was not the prevailing trend.

The nature of this awareness varies between those who see it as a global humanitarian dimension expressing sympathy and anger, and those who view it as a colonial issue that requires a deep understanding of the global system, the role of Western hegemony, and local governance.

Students active in independent discussion groups or boycott campaigns were found to possess a deeper political analysis compared to students who were isolated or not involved in group activities. The findings indicate that universities, particularly colleges of education, do not play a critical role in shaping political awareness, leaving a knowledge vacuum that students fill themselves through external sources such as the internet and social media. This aligns with Paulo Freire's view that "awareness is not given, but acquired" through experience and inquiry, not indoctrination.

2. What forms of daily practices express student solidarity with Palestine on campus?

Symbolic Acts of Resistance

- Students wear symbols such as the Palestinian keffiyeh, badges, or colors of the Palestinian flag.
- They share posts, images, or slogans related to Palestine on social media, especially Instagram and Facebook stories.
- Using WhatsApp statuses or group names to signal alignment with the Palestinian cause.

Boycott Campaigns

- Students participate in or support consumer boycotts of companies perceived to support the Israeli occupation.
- These boycotts are discussed and spread through word-of-mouth, online messaging, and student networks, often avoiding formal platforms to bypass restrictions.

Everyday Conversations and Micro-Engagements

- Informal peer discussions during breaks or in classrooms about the situation in Palestine.
- Engaging in peer education by sharing documentaries, infographics, or articles with classmates in subtle ways.

Avoidance as Resistance

- Some students deliberately opt out of university-endorsed events they perceive as aligned with neutrality or silence on Palestine.
- Others refuse to engage with consumer products or academic materials linked to complicit institutions, quietly crafting an ethical stance.

Creative and Covert Expression

- Writing poetry, short stories, or using artistic mediums like drawing or collage to represent Palestinian resistance, shared privately or in restricted circles.
- Some students integrate Palestinian themes into their academic assignments or presentations in subtle ways.

Digital Activism as a Safe Outlet

- Online platforms are key spaces for expressing solidarity. Students join Telegram channels, Twitter spaces, or Facebook groups to stay informed and participate in virtual solidarity actions.

These practices reflect what James Scott calls "everyday forms of resistance": covert, symbolic, and often ambiguous actions that operate under the radar of institutional authority. They allow students to express political alignment without directly confronting power structures that tightly control campus political expression.

3. To what extent are students aware of institutional constraints on expression and resistance?

Recognition of Unwritten Limits (Red Lines)'

Students are acutely aware that there are boundaries to what can be said or done politically within university settings. These boundaries are often not formally articulated, yet students internalise them through experience, peer interactions, and indirect cues from university authorities. This creates a pervasive culture of self-censorship.

Example: Some students described how even discussing Palestine publicly could be misinterpreted or discouraged, leading them to adopt more cautious or symbolic methods of expression.

Adaptation through Symbolic and Covert Resistance

Due to these constraints, students often resort to indirect forms of resistance, such as:

- Symbolic acts (e.g., wearing keffiyehs, sharing content online, and boycotting brands).
- "Hidden transcripts" (as theorised by James Scott): they develop covert scripts and private discourses of dissent in safe or semi-private spaces like close peer groups or online pseudonymous accounts.

This illustrates not only their awareness but also their tactical navigation of institutional power.

Perception of the University as a Controlled Space

Universities are viewed less as spaces of open dialogue and more as arenas of ideological struggle. Students perceive the university to be ideologically neutralised or depoliticised, where any overt political action—especially related to resistance—can be perceived as risky.

This results in what Bourdieu might describe as a "field of struggle," where students must position themselves carefully amid symbolic capital, institutional authority, and peer dynamics.

Differentiation Between Institutions

Students also demonstrate awareness that levels of control vary between universities. Some institutions are perceived as more permissive or lenient, while others enforce tighter ideological control, thereby shaping different strategies of engagement across campuses.

4. What is the role of political education and national identity in shaping student perspectives?

Marginalisation of Political Education in Formal Curricula

Political education within the official university curricula is perceived by most students as:

- Superficial and neutral, deliberately avoiding critical or politicised content.
- Detached from contemporary realities, particularly the Palestinian cause.
- Lacking depth or encouragement for critical thinking or political agency.

As a result, students do not rely on formal education to develop political understanding. Instead, they turn to informal sources such as:

- Social media,
- Independent news platforms,
- Personal experiences and peer discussions.

Formation of Political Identity Outside Institutions

The sense of national and political identity develops more strongly through:

- Collective solidarity with causes like Palestine,
- Cultural and religious affiliations,
- Feelings of moral obligation toward justice and resistance.

Thus, national identity becomes a motivator for resistance and solidarity, even when educational institutions fail to support this process.

Reproduction of Passive or Apolitical Citizens

According to critical theories (e.g. Freire, Gramsci, Giroux), the education system may:

- Reinforce dominant ideologies that promote obedience and avoid resistance.
- Depoliticise students, preventing them from engaging with real-world injustices.
- Undermine the potential of education as a liberatory force.

This creates a cognitive and emotional dissonance: while students may feel strongly about national or regional political issues (like Palestine), their educational experiences often fail to nurture or validate these concerns.

Potential for Critical Pedagogy

Despite institutional limitations, students demonstrate:

- A capacity for critical reflection, especially outside the classroom.
- A desire for curricula that integrate justice, history, and ethical responsibility.
- Openness to political engagement, if given intellectual tools and institutional support.

This indicates an untapped potential for reimagining political education as a space to build active, informed citizens aligned with national and global struggles.

5. How is the university space symbolically constructed by students in relation to conflict and resistance?

- Students perceive the university not as a neutral educational space, but as a field of ideological conflict—a "struggle of positions" in Gramscian terms. While formal curricula and institutional discourse often promote political neutrality or depoliticisation, students understand that ideological power is at work within university structures.
- Students identify symbolic and informal margins within the university—spaces that are

not officially recognised but allow limited expressions of political identity. These include informal discussions, social media activity, coded expressions, and participation in non-explicitly political cultural events. These margins are constantly negotiated and redefined based on institutional tolerance and the broader political atmosphere.

- The university space is constructed with a dual logic: what is visible and allowed (e.g., student activities within permissible boundaries), and what is invisible or suppressed (e.g., overt political activism). This division forces students to engage in "hidden transcripts" of resistance, as theorised by James Scott, where they resist symbolically while maintaining surface-level compliance.
- Everyday resistance practices—like boycotting products, sharing specific content online, or adopting particular dress codes or slogans—serve as symbolic claims over university space. These acts allow students to assert political agency and solidarity, especially regarding the Palestinian cause, without crossing institutional red lines.
- The symbolic construction of space also involves tactical adaptation to repression. Rather than withdrawing, students find ways to exist politically within confined spaces by manipulating signs, narratives, and practices to maintain a form of engaged presence.

6. How do solidarity and boycott practices function as everyday resistance?

- Students use solidarity gestures (such as wearing keffiyehs, sharing pro-Palestinian content online, or holding small group discussions) as symbolic refusals of dominant political narratives. These actions align with James Scott's notion of "hidden transcripts", where oppressed groups express resistance through indirect or disguised forms rather than open confrontation.
- Boycotting brands or products perceived as complicit in Israeli occupation allows students to exercise agency without crossing institutional red lines. This economic form of resistance is both low-risk and high-symbolism, offering a channel for political expression while avoiding direct conflict with university authorities or the state.
- Through participating in boycotts and solidarity movements, students reinforce their political and ethical identities, affirming their alignment with justice and Palestinian liberation. These acts also provide a way to reclaim a sense of collective power in an environment marked by political marginalisation and apathy.
- Resistance is not only expressed during protests or in formal activism; it is embedded into the everyday, from choices of consumption to digital expressions. This reflects a "pedagogy of refusal" where learning and acting politically become part of students' daily ethical practice.
- Given the tight control over political expression in Egyptian universities, such practices allow manoeuvring within the 'permissible' boundaries. Students adapt their resistance to avoid direct repression, demonstrating Bourdieu's concept of strategic action within constrained fields.
- These practices contribute to challenging hegemonic discourses, especially when institutional curricula remain silent or depoliticised. Through boycotts and solidarity, students contest dominant ideologies, engaging in what Gramsci would term a "war of position" inside the ideological apparatus of the university.

These findings are connected to several strands of theoretical literature discussed in the theoretical framework, as outlined below.

The findings resonate strongly with Paulo Freire's concept of consciousness formation through experience and questioning rather than indoctrination, as students developed political awareness outside formal education, where curricula fail to politicise or critically engage with Palestinian issues. The "neutral" and depoliticised educational environment described by participants aligns with Freire's critique of education as a potential tool of oppression rather than liberation.

James Scott's theory of hidden transcripts and covert resistance is clearly evident in students' use of symbolic, indirect resistance within the institution. Students' strategies of "camouflage," "symbolic evasion," and use of "institutional margins" to avoid direct confrontation while maintaining dissent mirror Scott's observations of everyday forms of resistance practised by subordinated groups under authoritarian constraints.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of education as a mechanism for reproducing dominant power structures and social hierarchies is illustrated in how curricula and institutional norms appear to produce a depoliticised national identity, discouraging students from critical engagement and solidarity beyond national borders. The students' perception of education as "neutral" and "superficial" supports Bourdieu's view of cultural reproduction and symbolic violence through schooling.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of the "struggle of positions" within civil society offers a useful lens for understanding students' symbolic contestations within the university. The university is a site of ideological conflict, rather than a neutral space, and the practice of resistance from within the system aligns with Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of cultural and symbolic battles in achieving hegemonic change.

Conclusion

Through in-depth analysis of the data extracted from the responses of 48 students from faculties of education at several Egyptian universities, a set of key points can be drawn that highlight student understandings of issues related to student activism, political practices, and solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

First, students' awareness of the symbolism of the university as a space for ideological struggle was evident. Many of them saw the university as a place for symbolic negotiation of identity and belonging, despite restrictions imposed by academic administration or university governing bodies. However, students expressed the presence of "margins" for manoeuvre and discussion in informal student activities, despite attempts to restrict political expression.

Second, daily practices of resistance, such as boycotts, have increased among students as a tool for rejecting policies that support the Israeli occupation, reflecting a growing understanding of the importance of symbolic resistance as an alternative to direct confrontation. Although some students expressed a decline in the effectiveness of these practices due to the restrictions imposed on campus, most continue to embrace them within a space characterised by hidden rebellion. Third, students' attitudes regarding university restrictions on political expression varied, with some suggesting that these restrictions were merely "unwritten rules," while others viewed them as part of a larger mechanism for controlling student activism.

However, there is no doubt that awareness of self-censorship is increasing among students, contributing to the shrinking spaces in which any real political movement can take place.

Finally, the challenges of social and economic conditions have emerged as a major influence on students' ability to engage in political activism and resistance. They have found themselves facing difficulties in securing the necessary resources for advocacy and boycott activities, which may impact the effectiveness of these activities.

About the Author

An educational editor, author, and writer specializing in education and social sciences. He holds a Ph.D. in Education, focusing on Curricula and Teaching Methods. He possesses extensive experience in educational research, having published numerous studies in the fields of research and educational sciences in Arabic. In addition to his contributions to translating academic and educational works into English, he has co-authored literary and educational articles addressing issues related to education and culture. https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9256-9100

Declaration of AI Refined

This document has benefited from the application of AI-driven tools, including Grammarly and Scholar AI Chat, to refine its linguistic aspects. These tools were utilised to correct grammar and spelling and improve the overall writing style. It is acknowledged that the use of these technologies may introduce certain AI-generated linguistic patterns. However, the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented remain the sole work of the authors.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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