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Motivations and Forms of Palestinian Political Activism

An examination of individual motivations and participation behaviour in the Palestinian Territories

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After 55 years of living under Israeli occupation, many Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip continue to struggle for statehood and freedom from perceived injustices in their treatment by Israeli military forces, civilian settlers and the Palestinian Authority. The resulting socio-political and economic frustrations are a plausible explanation for high levels of activism participation overall – yet they fail to account for why Palestinians choose vastly different forms of political action, while others exercise ‘passive activism’ or do not participate at all despite similar living conditions and shared political convictions.

Based on semi-structured interviews and novel data collected in a large representative survey, this study examines individual motivations for engaging in different forms of political activism in the Palestinian Territories. Findings are discussed in the broader research context and policy recommendations provided.

Introduction

“Our bullets stop on the body, but the effect of your brush travels all over the world, so it is a dangerous tool”, Taqi Sabateen remembers being told by an Israeli officer.¹ The artist from the Palestinian village of Husan near Bethlehem had been detained by the military for placing graffiti and paintings on the eight-metre-high wall separating parts of the West Bank from Israeli territories. Depicting soldiers and journalists, his artworks explore various political themes from racism to the isolation felt by many Palestinians today.

Sabateen’s story is no isolated case. Instead, it is just one illustration of the unique nature of modern political activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which overall features high participation rates by international comparison. In 2022, at least one in eight Palestinians engaged in direct political action in some capacity; during the days of the second intifada two decades earlier, some 75% of male and 42% female youth took to the streets.² Yet while core grievances are identified rather consistently throughout the three territories as (1) Israel’s external control over the Gaza Strip, (2) unemployment and poverty, and (3) the continuing occupation of the West Bank,³ the specific methods by which people try to address these political issues diverge drastically. Palestinian activism frequently manifests in public demonstrations and spreading of political messages, but also through cultural (e.g., art-based) channels or ‘passive activism’ behaviours such as resisting home evictions. At the extremes of the spectrum, nationalist groups advocate for political violence and armed struggle, while many other Palestinians are not engaged in any form of political expression at all.

From the well-documented challenges of life in the Palestinian Territories⁴ and proclamations by activist movements themselves, it is often concluded that political activism is primarily a reaction to perceived oppression through the Israeli military occupation, expansion of illegal settlements, and administrative corruption within the Palestinian Authority. But at the individual level, the reality today raises two paradoxes. First, being politically active even in less confrontational forms (such as distributing leaflets or organising social media campaigns) requires personal sacrifice beyond time and resource commitment. Amidst ongoing tensions, Palestinian activists face a substantial risk of arrest, injury, death, harassment or property loss. While these costs are borne by activists individually, their political objectives (such as ending the occupation) would usually benefit a larger population and offer no specific rewards to those who fought for them. In light of this unattractive outlook, what motivates some Palestinians to take action nonetheless while others remain inactive? And subsequently, what causes those who become active to do so in fundamentally different ways despite a similar socio-political context and shared goals?

Contrasting the majority of research focusing on societal or group dynamics, this study investigates these questions from an individual psychological perspective. Using both qualitative and quantitative data from field interviews with activists in the West Bank and a representative survey across the Palestinian Territories, it contributes differentiated insights into the motivational drivers of political activism. Results are placed in a discussion of the regional context and policy recommendations are formulated.

Emergence and structure of Palestinian political activism

Although political activism in the Palestinian Territories today is predominantly directed against two sources of dissatisfaction – the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority – its main narratives have roots that precede both of these entities. As one of the world’s most enduring conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute involves a complex political history that has been laid out extensively elsewhere.⁵ To inform this study’s

¹ Sharar, S. (2021, July 14). Palestinian graffiti artist paints stories on West Bank barrier. Anadolu Agency. <https://bit.ly/i7q1>

² Barber, B. (2016). Whither the ‘children of the stone’? An entire life under occupation. doi:10.1525/jps.2016.45.2.77; current data based on quantitative analysis presented herein.

³ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2021): Public Opinion Poll #81. <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/858>

⁴ See Human Rights Watch (2022). World report 2022: Israel and Palestine. <https://bit.ly/hrw2022>

⁵ E.g., Gelvin, J. L. (2021). The Israel-Palestine conflict. Cambridge.

analytical approach and discussion of results, this section instead provides a brief review of developments that had notable influence on the current structure of political activism in the Palestinian Territories.

Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, followed immediately by war with its Arab neighbours, heralded the start of a defining era for regional political activity for generations to come. In what is known among Palestinians as 'Al-Nakbah' ('the catastrophe'), an estimated 726,000 Palestinians or 80% of the population were displaced forcefully or fled from over 400 villages, mostly seeking refuge in the West Bank, Gaza Strip or neighboring Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.⁶ The following years saw the gradual emergence of a Palestinian "diaspora consciousness" primarily out of refugee camps administered by the newly created United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), where people felt particularly isolated and powerless.⁷ Until the 1960s, this developed into a renewed national identity rooted in an Egyptian-inspired pan-Arabism and unanimous demands for establishing an independent Palestinian state, the return of refugees to their homeland, and destruction of the state of Israel. Leading up to and in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, several guerilla groups formed along this nationalist cause and ultimately joined forces under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) despite their ideological and tactical differences.⁸ Israel's decisive territorial gains in the war translated into its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that persists until today – as do the guerilla groups from this era, who still define the landscape of political parties and some activist movements in the Palestinian Territories.

Over the next decades, two waves of unrest known as the 'intifadas' ('shaking off') would shape the conflict. The first intifada began in December 1987 following months of mounting civil disobedience, strikes, and youth mobilisation.⁹ By this time, a whole generation of Palestinians had grown up under military occupation – their political status was uncertain, their civil rights diminished, and their economic status low and dependent on unskilled jobs in Israel.¹⁰ A new cadre of activists took opposition to the PLO leadership, which, although a powerful symbol, had failed both by diplomatic and military efforts to achieve Palestinian autonomy or halt land appropriation of Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories. Lasting for five years, the uprising was defined by widespread popular resistance and the image of masked Palestinian protesters throwing stones at Israeli soldiers.¹¹ Meanwhile, activists connected to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood began establishing Hamas as a religious alternative to the secular PLO that would grow into a major political force over time.

Throughout the 1990s, the Oslo Accords inspired hope for a peaceful resolution and established the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a structure for limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. But with the passing of several negotiation deadlines and accusations of corruption and human rights abuses by the PA at the turn of the millennium, disappointment and mutual distrust resurfaced. A second, much more violent intifada erupted in 2000 that caused mass casualties on both sides as Palestinians engaged in suicide bombings, gunfire and rocket attacks while Israel engaged in heavy military combat operations and airstrikes. Protests and armed resistance attracted support from all parts of the Palestinian society, including Palestinian citizens of Israel. Changes in government on both sides and Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 ultimately marked the end of the uprising.

Until today, the Palestinian Territories remain politically divided between Hamas, who forms the government in the Gaza Strip and occasionally exchanges armed confrontations with Israel, and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. However, in the absence of conventional

⁶ United Nations (1949). Final report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East.

⁷ Britannica Educational Publishing (2011). Historic Palestine, Israel, and the emerging Palestinian autonomous areas. 78-9.

⁸ Notable groups include Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Syrian-backed al-ṣā'iqah.

⁹ Institute for Palestine Studies (n.d.). The first intifada and the beginning of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. <https://bit.ly/ipsnd>

¹⁰ Britannica Educational Publishing (2011). Historic Palestine, Israel, and the emerging Palestinian autonomous areas. 93-4.

¹¹ Qumsiyeh, M. B. (2011). Popular resistance in Palestine: A history of hope and empowerment. Pluto Press.

opportunities for political participation,¹² much of the public discourse plays out on the level of activist movements.

With notable exceptions (e.g., an escalation wave of armed attacks in 2015-16), modern political activism in the Palestinian Territories is less characterised by continuous violence than during the intifadas. Instead, it has become more reactive to local events that spur relatively small-scale, but intense moments of protest and often lead to clashes with Israeli or Palestinian security forces. Such trigger events are arrests or killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces or perceived signs of PA oppression such as the June 2021 death of Nizar Banat, a well-known opposition figure.¹³ In addition to increased volatility, Palestinian political activism has also matured into a diverse mix of forms. Among the most frequent activities today are awareness campaigns (including on social media or through banners, graffiti etc.) and public protests. However, the range of political expression extends further: Major nationalist movements such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) operate militant groups in Gaza and the West Bank that continue to advocate for political violence under the ideological guise of Islamic fundamentalism or Marxist-Leninism. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, a large share of the Palestinian population is not politically active in any form.

Under the principle 'existence is resistance', a special variant of Palestinian activism has emerged particularly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. By refusing to comply with house eviction or demolition orders or not moving away despite pressure from Israeli settlements, people signal their protest in what may be described as 'passive activism'. However, since the extent of political motivation (as opposed to mere unwillingness to relocate, for example) cannot be accurately determined in these cases, they are out of scope for this research, which instead focuses on pro-active forms of political engagement.

Research approach

Research mainly from political, historical and sociological disciplines has extensively analysed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the formation of social movements in the region.¹⁴ By contrast, this study takes an individual psychological approach in order to distinguish motivations and their effects on participation behaviour across specific activism forms in the Palestinian Territories.

Several competing (though not necessarily incompatible) motivational drivers are considered: (1) ideological commitment or belief in 'the cause';¹⁵ (2) pre-existing relationships to other activists;¹⁶ (3) direct rewards for participation;¹⁷ and (4) social identity or group-belonging.¹⁸ Testing their relevance for individual participation in political activism adds novel insights to related policy and scientific debates.

¹² The last national election took place in 2006. Elections scheduled for 2021 were postponed, sparking widespread protest. Less influential municipality elections generally see low voter turnout.

¹³ Knell, Y. (2021, September 7). Nizar Banat: The death shaking the Palestinian leadership. <https://bbc.in/3NVw1GK>

¹⁴ E.g., Sa'di, Ahmad H. (2017). Palestinian social movement and protest within the Green Line. In *Israel and its Palestinian citizens*, 369-92. Cambridge University Press; Hoiglit, J. (2015). Nonviolent mobilization between a rock and a hard place: Popular resistance and double repression in the West Bank. <https://bit.ly/hoiglit>

¹⁵ See Atran, S., & Axelrod, R. (2008). Reframing sacred values. doi:10.1111/j.1571-9979.2008.00182.x; Ginges et al. (2011). Psychology out of the laboratory. doi:10.1037/a0024715

¹⁶ See Maher, T. V. & Earl, J. (2017). Pathways to contemporary youth protest: The continuing relevance of family, friends, and school for youth micromobilization. doi:10.1108/S2050-206020170000014001

¹⁷ See Lichbach, M. (1998). *The rebel's dilemma*. The University of Michigan Press.

¹⁸ See Hogg, M., & Adelman, J. (2013). Uncertainty-identity theory: Extreme groups, radical behavior, and authoritarian leadership. doi:10.1111/josi.12023

Methodological approach

Two research questions guide the empirical strategy of this study:

1. Which motivational drivers are most prevalent in the decision to become a political activist in the Palestinian Territories?
2. Among Palestinian activists, how do motivational drivers differ between specific activism forms?

People's political attitudes and behaviours are often rooted in formative life events and experiences – this particularly applies in regions of violent conflict, where such experiences can even amount to psychological stress or trauma in some cases. For conducting research on political activism behaviour in this context, it is important to acknowledge the potential for personal nuances while maintaining robustness in the analysis. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to reflect these considerations. First, a series of in-person interviews with Palestinians engaged across various activism forms probed the importance of different motivational factors while providing opportunities for additional insights from respondents. Second, several items were added to a large-scale representative survey across the Palestinian Territories for a statistical evaluation of participation behaviour and motivations. Implementation strategies and results from both the qualitative and quantitative analysis are presented in the following sections.

Analysis I: Qualitative interviews

A series of eight in-depth interviews was held by the author from March to April 2022 with political activists in the West Bank to examine motivational drivers (1) for activism engagement in general and (2) for specific forms of engagement. A semi-structured format allowed the conversations to develop naturally within a consistent frame of pre-defined topics and question prompts. As a result, all interviews covered participants' personal background, views on the current political and social situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, their own involvement in political activism and motivations, as well as alternative forms of engagement and what may motivate other people to engage in them.

Collecting data through interviews presents the practical challenge of smaller samples and consequentially, a lack of generalisability to a larger population. This study aimed to actively mitigate this concern not only through a mixed-methods approach, but also by recruiting a diverse mix of respondents with regard to activism forms and backgrounds. As a result, the final interview sample is well-distributed in the West Bank by location (Areas A, B and C.¹⁹ including major political hubs such as Jenin, Nablus, Birzeit, Ramallah and Hebron); residency (cities, villages, refugee camps and university campuses); gender; age group;²⁰; activism forms (community volunteering, social media advocacy, party-aligned campaigning, peaceful and violent protesting); and engagement intensity, ranging from sporadic involvement to full-time commitment.

A separate concern was the sensitive nature of discussing political behaviour in an environment where Palestinian activists are frequently targeted by Israeli and Palestinian security forces. Both to protect participants from negative consequences of taking part in this research, and to encourage accurate responses, the interviews were conducted in a strict ethical code of confidentiality, with all quotes anonymous and no kept record of personally identifiable information.

Motivational drivers for becoming an activist

Across all interviews, the activists expressed strong convictions towards 'the cause' and the importance of their efforts in bringing about direct political change. In some cases, this manifested in abstract *ideological beliefs* and missions such as achieving justice, ending the Israeli military occupation, rectifying the situation of

¹⁹ The 1995 Oslo Accords established three administrative divisions in the West Bank: Area A includes major cities and is exclusively administered by the Palestinian Authority; surrounding Area B involves partial Israeli administration, notably in security matters; the remaining Area C covers over 60% of the West Bank territory and is under full Israeli administration.

²⁰ All participants were required to be above the age of 18.

Palestinian refugees or challenging the societal system as a whole. Such idealist expressions were most prevalent among student activists. In the remaining interviews, 'the cause' was typically defined in terms of smaller, more immediate social-political objectives: protecting local communities against violence from Israeli settlers or the military, supporting disadvantaged families, or exposing corruption in the Palestinian Authority administration and security services. Although these goals appear more pragmatic in nature, they too were noticeably framed inside narratives of perceived injustice and a moral duty to take action, indicating a general propensity to ideological commitment among Palestinian activists.

Another similarity was the existence of *social relationships* – most notably, bonds of friendship or family – that preceded the initial engagement process. Five respondents confirmed having been influenced by peers in their decision to take political action. However, more detailed exploration of this aspect revealed that these connections primarily functioned as entry points to specific forms of activism (e.g., being introduced to an organisation by a friend) after they had already developed the idea of becoming politically active in some capacity.

By contrast, receiving *direct rewards* (such as money) from activist movements as compensation for individual engagement was only reported by one member of an organisation aligned with a major political party in the Palestinian Territories; this was ultimately determined to be a case of career benefits rather than activism incentivisation. By and large, direct rewards did not play any meaningful role in mobilising political action among the interview sample.

The final motivational driver under examination was related to the concept of *social identity*. As psychological research demonstrates, both people's sense of who they are and behaviour can be influenced by membership in various social groups such as a religion, family, sports club – or political movements, which can similarly provide a strong sense of belonging and meaning.²¹ Indeed, in five out of eight interviews the role of being a 'political activist' constituted a central part of respondents' self-image and how they wish to be seen by others. One respondent described their activism engagement as "the highest stage of my life, even above my marriage". Substantial time-commitment to their political work, which in some cases amounted to a full-time job equivalent, further supports this notion.

Differentiating forms of political activism

Beyond a general assessment of motivations for political action, this study is concerned with examining why political activism takes place in a broad variety of forms despite widely similar values across the Palestinian public. When asked to describe today's structure of Palestinian political activism in their own words, three respondents independently proposed a classification into three groups. First, the largest share of the population is not active in any form and was described as "removed", "disconnected" and "not interested" about changing the political status quo for various reasons. The second group comprises of activists strictly committed to non-violent forms such as peaceful protests, awareness campaigns and community volunteering. The third group then consists of activists who support and engage in acts of political violence, for instance as part of protests and street clashes, or less frequently by committing armed attacks against mainly Israeli targets.

To justify this classification, proponents referred to their own political experiences and that of others from their network. Accordingly, Palestinian activists often participate in more than one form – for instance, organising social media outreach and attending a peaceful protest, or alternatively fighting in armed clashes and popular unrests. But in doing so, they stay within one 'category' and do not usually engage in both non-violent and violent behaviours at the same time. Two explanations for this observation were offered in the form of (1) contradicting perceptions of efficacy, and (2) different exposure to violence.

In the first explanation, movements committing to strict non-violence are often seen as ineffective in achieving political change. One participant remembers: "After I finished school my friend told me about this

²¹ See Hogg, M., & Adelman, J. (2013). Uncertainty-identity theory: Extreme groups, radical behavior, and authoritarian leadership. doi:10.1111/josi.12023

organisation doing non-violent resistance. I just laughed at him: ‘what can non-violence do when even violence didn’t work [in the second intifada]?’”. Almost all interview participants recalled similar initial scepticism and even suspicions that non-violent activist organisations might be “normalising” the Israeli occupation and PA administration by cooperating at an institutional level, for instance when organising cultural events. Yet for each of today’s non-violent activists in the interview sample, a turning point came with their first experiences of this form, as described by one participant:

“The first time I came along to their ‘peaceful demonstration’, soldiers showed up. I immediately dropped my sign and ran away like I was used to. After a while, I turned around and saw no one had left except me. Everyone was still there, and the soldiers didn’t attack. (...) I slowly walked back to my sign, and after a while I stood directly in front of the soldiers and held it up. That’s when I realised the power of non-violent resistance.”

For non-violent Palestinian activists, part of this power is their ability to connect with international audiences – including left-leaning Israelis – and garner external support for the Palestinian cause, which they consider to be vital in shifting the political tide of the conflict. Violence is seen as a strategic roadblock to meaningful success in this regard.

In the second explanation, a differentiating factor largely consistent with respondents’ personal backgrounds was that those with childhood exposure to extreme violence (usually during the second intifada of 2000-05) tend to strictly oppose violence as a political means due to these traumatic memories. Among the interview sample, those strongly in favour of armed confrontations – by themselves or others – did not report similar experiences.

The role of refugee camps

Categorising political activism in the Palestinian Territories based on (dis-)approval of violence is controversial, and several interview respondents were hesitant or opposed to this idea when presented by the author. Despite coming from different regional and political backgrounds, one commonality of these activists was their residency in the UNRWA refugee camps that operate in the West Bank since 1950.

In general, moral support for all activism forms is high and stable across the Palestinian public, with 50-70% approval rates for peaceful popular resistance and 40-60% of people endorsing armed confrontations.²² But while activists outside refugee camps tend to make a conscious choice for either non-violent or violent forms, this line appears less clear inside the UNRWA camps. Instead, respondents there emphasised a need for the full spectrum of activities:

“Everyone asks why we do violent resistance, but no one asks why they do violent occupation. We perfectly understand the power balance [against Israel]. So if we want to achieve anything, we simply must resist with everything we have, not just focusing on military struggle or peaceful struggle. Everyone needs to do whatever is suitable for them.”

Follow-up questions revealed that activists in refugee camps were less focused on deliberating which form of activism they wanted to engage in, and instead viewed their efforts as a necessary reaction to external aggression and the “hopeless situation” imposed on the people. In addition, one respondent described the pathway towards activism engagement in the camps primarily as a function of family preferences and socialisation into respective political groups. In line with this insight, exposure to violence also was not found to be a differentiating factor between activism forms inside West Bank refugee camps.

²² Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2022): Public Opinion Poll #83 [Data set]. <https://bit.ly/kaspsr83>

Motivations for staying politically active in the long run

Given the significant risks involved in challenging the status quo in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, all interviewed activists reported experiencing emotional strain from their political work. Most had seriously considered leaving the activism field, and sometimes even physically the region behind at least once before. Three primary motivations emerged as reasons for continuing their efforts regardless: A sense of social responsibility towards their communities, families or other activists in the Palestinian Territories; a desire to stay resilient ('sumud', a widely used term among Palestinian activists) and to not concede to "the other side", such as settler violence or the Israeli occupation at large; as well as positive wellbeing effects, manifesting in a strengthened sense of meaning and empowerment. This last aspect, which lends further support to the relevance of social identity for motivating political activism, was most emphasised by non-violent activists in rural areas: "When I am protesting [peacefully], I feel empowered, like I am really making a difference to the situation and I can be an example for others."

Analysis II: Quantitative survey

In addition to the insights on political activism from interviews in the West Bank, a data analysis was conducted with two objectives: to obtain robust findings from larger and more representative samples across all Palestinian Territories (notably including the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, as well as non-activist respondents); and to statistically validate key findings from the qualitative analysis presented so far.

Overview

The survey was implemented in collaboration with the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), an independent non-profit institute conducting public opinion polls across the Palestinian Territories. Among the distinct advantages over alternative datasets in the region is the exceptionally rigorous selection process that ensures representativeness of the overall population.²³ Data collection took place in March 2022 as part of the 83rd wave of quarterly PSR polls and replicated in June²⁴ using both existing items from the main survey and several new items added for the purposes of this study (see Figure 1 for an overview).

Existing items measured participants' socio-demographic background as well as attitudes across a wide range of topics relevant to the context of political activism: the general situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, corruption in the PA/Hamas administrations, personal freedoms and safety, main challenges facing Palestinians as well as support for non-violent and violent political action.

The attitudinal variables were supplemented by several new items designed to measure participation behaviour and motivations for different activism forms. Specifically, responses to the main question indicated recent participation (presented in a time frame of the last 12 months) in up to two activism forms from a list. The available answer options reflect the most frequently observed activism forms in the Palestinian Territories today, as outlined earlier: membership in political organisations, monetary donations, volunteering time, distribution of political messages, non-violent protests and violent protests. Two follow-up items either asked about respondents' main reason not to engage in any political activism (if they had answered the main question accordingly), or else to estimate the intensity of their commitment (perceived importance) to take part in the selected activities.

After structuring the dataset, statistical tests²⁵ were used to provide quantitative insights on political activism and to validate key findings from the interview analysis.

²³ Households are chosen at random from the official 3,200 census 'counting areas' and individual participants selected using Kish grids. If necessary, samples are re-balanced to correct for bias and to reflect age demographics by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

²⁴ Equivalent data was collected again in June 2022 (PSR poll #84), confirming the results presented in this paper.

²⁵ Main methods used: Chi-square tests of independence and logistic regression models with activism support/participation as the dependent variables. For methodological questions contact the author at n.u.mallock@lse.ac.uk.

Figure 1. List of variables.

Notes: Non-exhaustive selection from overall PSR survey dataset.²⁶ Some items shown in abbreviated form.

Category	Question description	Format
Existing items	In general, how would you describe conditions of the Palestinians in the Palestinian areas in the West Bank [Gaza Strip] these days?	(1-5)
	Would you say that these days your security and safety, and that of your family, is assured or not assured?	(1-4)
	Do you think that there is corruption in PA [Hamás] institutions?	(Yes/No)
	Some people say that the Palestinian Authority has become a burden on the Palestinian people while others say that it is an accomplishment for the Palestinian people. What do you think?	(Yes/No)
	In your view, can people in your area (under the PA in the West Bank/or under Hamás in Gaza) criticize the authority without fear?	(Yes/No)
	[Do you support:] Resort to popular non-violent and unarmed resistance	(1-4)
	[Do you support:] Return to the armed intifada and confrontations	(1-4)
	[Do you support:] Armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel	(1-4)
	Region [governorate]	(Categorical)
	Gender	
	Age	
	Employment status	
	Education level	
Marital status		
Income class [relative to poverty line]		
(...)		
New items	Have you recently participated in the following activities? Select up to two answers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I joined a political movement (not a party) • I donated money to a political movement (not a party) • I volunteered to recruit individuals or distribute leaflets • I spread political messages (e.g., through social media, banners, graffiti) • I participated in a popular non-violent protest • I participated in a popular protest where violence was used by the participants 	(Categorical)
	[If answered No to all] What is the main reason you did not participate in these activities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not interested • Did not have time • These activities are ineffective • These activities are dangerous • Other (please specify) 	(Categorical)
	[If answered Yes to any] How important was participating in these activities to you?	(0-10)

Why (not) become a political activist?

The final survey data consists of 1,197 observations proportionally spread across the Occupied Palestinian Territories and various socio-demographic backgrounds. Thereof, 130 respondents (10.8%) reported recent engagement in one or more activism forms, 923 (77.1%) indicated no recent involvement in any form and 144 (12.0%) refused to answer the question; among usable responses, this results in an overall activism participation rate among Palestinians of 12.3%.

²⁶ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2022): Public Opinion Poll #83 [Data set]. <https://bit.ly/kaspsr83>

Several considerations are important for a correct interpretation. First, international comparison with data from European countries reveals an average participation rate of 7.5%.²⁷ While the difference may intuitively appear small, it corresponds to a large and highly statistically significant gap: Palestinians are 64% more likely to engage in political activism than the average European. Second, responses in the 2018 Arab Barometer survey²⁸ show 22.2% of Palestinians having participated in a protest or violent activism at least once before in their lifetime; however, this time frame likely inflates results by including the second intifada period for many adults, during which participation rates had reached up to 75%.²⁹ Although the survey is not directly comparable (mostly due to its different scope of political behaviour), the activism participation rate of 12.3% identified in this study appears plausible as a 'normal' rate over the shorter time span indicated in the question. On the other hand, a general concern for any research on sensitive political behaviour is that some people likely understate or hide their involvement. As such, the data presented herein should be considered a lower-bound estimate of true activism participation levels in the Palestinian Territories.

Examining the data on aggregate level shows that *ideological beliefs* by themselves appear to have no motivational effect on general activism participation. Large shares of the Palestinian public agree that ending the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and blockade of the Gaza Strip is the most pressing problem in the region today (35%), and that popular resistance – regardless of which form – is the best means to achieve this goal (65%), with only 27% preferring a non-activist approach of political negotiations with Israel. Yet compared to the significantly lower participation rate (12.3%), these widely held convictions do not reliably translate into actual behaviour. Statistical analysis further confirms that dissatisfaction with the political status quo³⁰ does not significantly predict overall activism engagement in the survey sample.

Socio-demographic background also had, by and large, no significant association with activism participation except for gender (males being 9 percentage points more likely to engage than females) and education at graduate level (19 percentage points more likely).

Data was also collected on reasons for people *not* to engage in political activism. Those who reported not having participated in any form predominantly stated a lack of interest (56%), followed by time-constraints (14%) and viewing political activism as ineffective (13%) or too dangerous (7%). This is largely in line with interview findings where politically inactive Palestinians were described as “removed” and “not interested” in working towards political change.

Motivational differences between activism forms

The relative frequency of reported participation on the level of activism forms is illustrated in Figure 2. Among politically active respondents, non-violent protests (30.1%), membership in non-party organisations (21.8%) and distributing political messages (21.2%) were the most prevalent activities, followed to a lesser extent by monetary donations (12.2%), volunteering (7.7%) and violent protests (7.1%). Again, it should be acknowledged that studying sensitive political behaviour likely results in under-reported participation, which could disproportionately affect more extreme forms of activism (such as joining violent protests). However, since even lower-intensity forms (e.g., joining an organisation or volunteering) can involve high risks for Palestinian activists, the effect on the distribution between forms is deemed less severe than in other regional contexts.

Two components of ideological commitment are dissatisfaction with the political status quo (as previously defined), and perceived importance of engagement, reported on a scale from 0 to 10. Separate testing for relationships between these drivers and each of the six activism forms resulted in no statistically significant relationships. Only a marginal association existed between joining an organisation and higher

²⁷ Calculated using activism-related items from 29 European countries; European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9 (2018). Data file edition 3.1. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018

²⁸ Arab Barometer (2019). Arab Barometer Wave V [Data set]. <https://bit.ly/abb1819>

²⁹ Barber, B. (2016). Whither the 'children of the stone'? An entire life under occupation. doi:10.1525/jps.2016.45.2.77

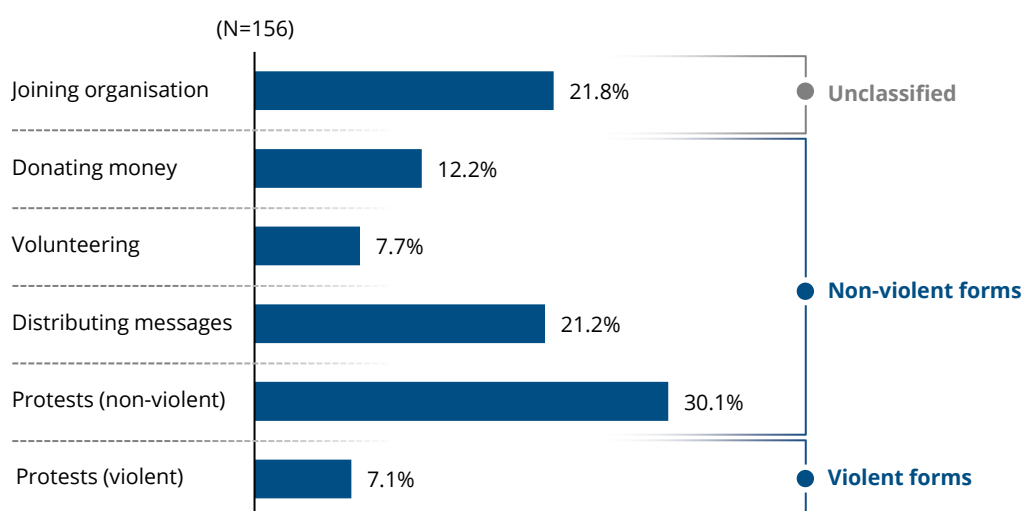
³⁰ Calculated index of disapproval of the general situation for Palestinians, lack of perceived personal safety, and seeing the PA as a burden on the Palestinian people.

perceived importance – however, this finding should be treated with caution due to the small sample size for this particular activism form (N=34) which does not allow for sufficiently robust analysis.

When grouping different activism forms together instead of examining them individually, a statistically significant split was discovered only between protesting behaviour (non-violent and violent) and non-protesting behaviour, with participants in the former reporting higher perceived importance (mean difference +1.0 on the 0-10 scale). Previous findings have shown that ideological commitment did not predict activism engagement overall. Yet among activists, it seems to be associated with choosing more confrontational forms of engagement.

Figure 2. Relative frequency of reported activism forms

Notes: Total of first and second choices of respective activism forms, excluding negative and non-responses.



The violence divide

A key finding in the qualitative analysis was a reluctance among activists in West Bank refugee camps to distinguish between non-violent and violent forms of activism compared to other respondents. In order to test this hypothesis while circumventing the issue of small sample sizes for specific activism forms, a variable is constructed combining data from both new (behavioural) and existing (attitudinal) PSR survey items. A marker for 'choosing sides' on the issue of non-violence vs. violence, the variable equals 0 if a respondent participated in or supports both categories at the same time; and 1 if participation/support is limited to either non-violent or violent activism.³¹ Statistical testing confirms the hypothesis: residence in a refugee camp decreases the propensity to make this distinction by 9.0%. Yet an even stronger gap was found among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which were 17.6% less likely to choose between either activism category compared to the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Both findings were statistically significant and robust against controlling for socio-demographic background.

Replication of findings

To test the validity and robustness of the results presented above, equivalent data (using the same survey items) was collected as part of the 84th PSR poll in June 2022. Respective data analysis confirms the findings and distribution of participation in activism forms as shown in Figure 2.

³¹ Items used: Support for peaceful protesting and participation in donations, volunteering, distributing messages or non-violent protests load into 'propensity to non-violence'; support for violent resistance or armed attacks on Israeli civilians and participation in violent protests load into 'propensity to violence'; Observations without data in any of the two categories are omitted.

Discussion

Interpretation of results

The stated purpose of this research was to examine individual-level motivations for participation in political activism in the Palestinian Territories (1) in general and (2) when differentiating between activism forms. Several potential drivers were tested empirically in addition to exploratory insights.

Ideological or cause-commitment was found not to be a distinctive feature of activism participation as similar political beliefs were observed across large parts of society, including the majority of non-activists. Yet, in-depth interviews revealed a varying but consistently high degree of commitment among activists that appeared to precede their initial engagement. This suggests that although not a motivational driver by itself, ideological commitment may be a precondition for Palestinians to become political activists. Among this active group, more intense commitment was significantly linked to choosing protesting (non-violent or violent) over less confrontational activism forms. More controlled experimental studies should aim to solidify these conclusions and rule out potential reverse effects (i.e., that higher commitment may be a result of engagement, particularly in confrontational forms).

Two 'pull-factors' capable of activating ideologically inclined individuals were suggested by the qualitative analysis: *pre-existing relationships* such as friends that are already active, and the affirmation of one's *social identity* by belonging to a political group. While the former seems to function mostly as a pathway to initial engagement, the latter proved to be a strong individual motivation for continuing activism participation over a longer time span.

Meanwhile, *direct rewards* and socio-demographic characteristics were, by and large, unrelated to both overall involvement and specific forms of political activism in the Palestinian Territories.

Finally, both in-depth interviews and representative survey data suggest that the distinction between non-violent and violent activism, initially suggested by respondents, is made predominantly by those outside of refugee camps. There, people instead tend to emphasise that both types of engagement should be pursued. Further examination of root causes for this observation should focus on camps' high level of socio-economic deprivation, both in absolute terms and relative to other parts of Palestinian society.³² Given that a similar effect was observed in the Gaza Strip where conditions and political outlooks are also worse compared to West Bank Palestinians, it seems likely that environmental factors play an important role in forming this view.

Policy recommendations

Within the regional scope and previously discussed limitations, this study contributes to the field particularly through its focus on individual psychological motivations and the collection of quantitative behavioural data. On this basis, careful recommendations can be derived to inform policymakers and organisations aiming to promote civic engagement while reducing the potential for political violence in the Palestinian Territories.

In absence of differentiated research, one approach that has found its way into policy practice in many countries is to define 'vulnerability factors' or personal characteristics of politically active individuals, particularly in an attempt to anticipate radicalisation and violent extremism.³³ The empirical results herein however, in line with increasing evidence from other contexts, reject this idea: socio-demographic markers fail to predict participation in political activism of any form. Serious risks of discrimination involved in such policy frameworks should further discourage their use.³⁴

³² Relative deprivation has been causally linked to frustration and subsequent political protest behaviour; see Gurr, T. (2010). *Why men rebel* (40th anniversary ed.). Paradigm.

³³ E.g., Silber, M. D., & Bhatt, A. (2007). *Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat*. NYPD Intelligence Unit. <https://bit.ly/govnypd>

³⁴ Hillyard, P. (1993). *Suspect community: People's experience of the prevention of terrorism acts in Britain*. Pluto Press. See also Ward, A. (2019 March 4). To ensure deradicalisation programmes are effective, better evaluation practices must first be implemented. <https://bit.ly/randrad>

Similarly, understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict primarily as an ideological struggle falls short of today's reality at least on the level of activism behaviour, where cause-commitment is no reliable differentiator between the passive majority and those who choose to become active at all. This decision instead appears to be the outcome of a complex mix of psychological motivations and situational factors, including a desire for group-belonging (strengthening social identity) and preconceived opinions about the effectiveness of different activism forms. It is at these points that organisations, activists themselves and political leaders have opportunities to promote desirable behaviour in the context of political activism.

For UNRWA and other organisations working in disadvantaged areas of the Palestinian Territories such as refugee camps and the Gaza Strip, fostering the differentiation between political non-violence and violence may be one promising strategy. Increased public understanding of these activism forms as separate categories can encourage people to 'choose sides'. However, recognising that this differentiation alone does not correspond to lower levels of violence in other areas today, these efforts should be accompanied by targeted incentives. Findings from this study can offer initial ideas, for instance supporting non-violent activist movements in building stronger and more socially attractive group identities than violent organisations offer to potential recruits as a motivational driver.

Activist organisations in the remaining West Bank can utilise already existing tendencies to differentiate in this way and focus on informational outreach. Their goal should be convincing politically interested individuals of the advantages of non-violence as seen by themselves: the ability to garner wider support and be vocal about their demands without facing denunciation or safety risks to the same extent as violent activists. If successful, these efforts would not only allow them to attract new members, but also help deconstruct preconceptions and suspicions among the public that appear to make violent activism forms the preferred choice for some individuals today.

Finally, the findings of this study also underscore more general appeals towards political leaders on both the Israeli and Palestinian side. The perpetual military occupation since 1967, aggressive settlement policy in the West Bank and evident corruption in PA institutions have produced intense social-political inequality and frustrations among Palestinians as a whole, and some groups in particular. While citizens and organisations should work to counteract the spread of political violence in the Palestinian Territories, leaders have an obligation to fight more pro-actively against the conditions that are stoking these resentments and produce fertile ground for extreme behaviour. Beyond obvious moral reasons, governments on both sides would serve their longer-term strategic self-interest and greatly reduce the costs of the conflict by encouraging civic engagement and offering a future vision for the region.

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