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ECHOES OF VIOLENCE IN THE HALLS OF ACADEMIA

PALESTINIAN ARAB ISRAELI STUDENTS

DURING THE MAY 2021 EVENTS AND BEYOND

WHO ARE THE PALESTINIAN CITIZENS OF ISRAEL?

- **Different terminologies:** Arab Israelis, 48 Arabs, Palestinians of the Interior, Palestinians inside the green line, etc. (Makhoul, 2018)
- **Indigenous, ethnonational, cultural, and linguistic minority** comprising 21% of Israel's population (CBS, 2019);
- **Four components of identity**:
  - (1) Arab by ethnicity;
  - (2) Palestinian by nationality;
  - (3) Israeli by citizenship;
  - (4) Muslim, Christian or Druze by religion.

WHO ARE THE PALESTINIAN CITIZENS OF ISRAEL?

- **Complex sociopolitical space:** citizens of a country at war with their national group (Arar, 2012) – perceptions of "fifth column";
- **Formally citizens but experience systematic discrimination in all areas of life** (Sa'di, 2014);
- **Deeply divided society** with high levels of segregation, including in the K–12 education system (Cohen, 2015; Ido et al., 2021)

SES tiers of Israel's localities by population group in 2017 (Israel Democracy Institute, 2022)
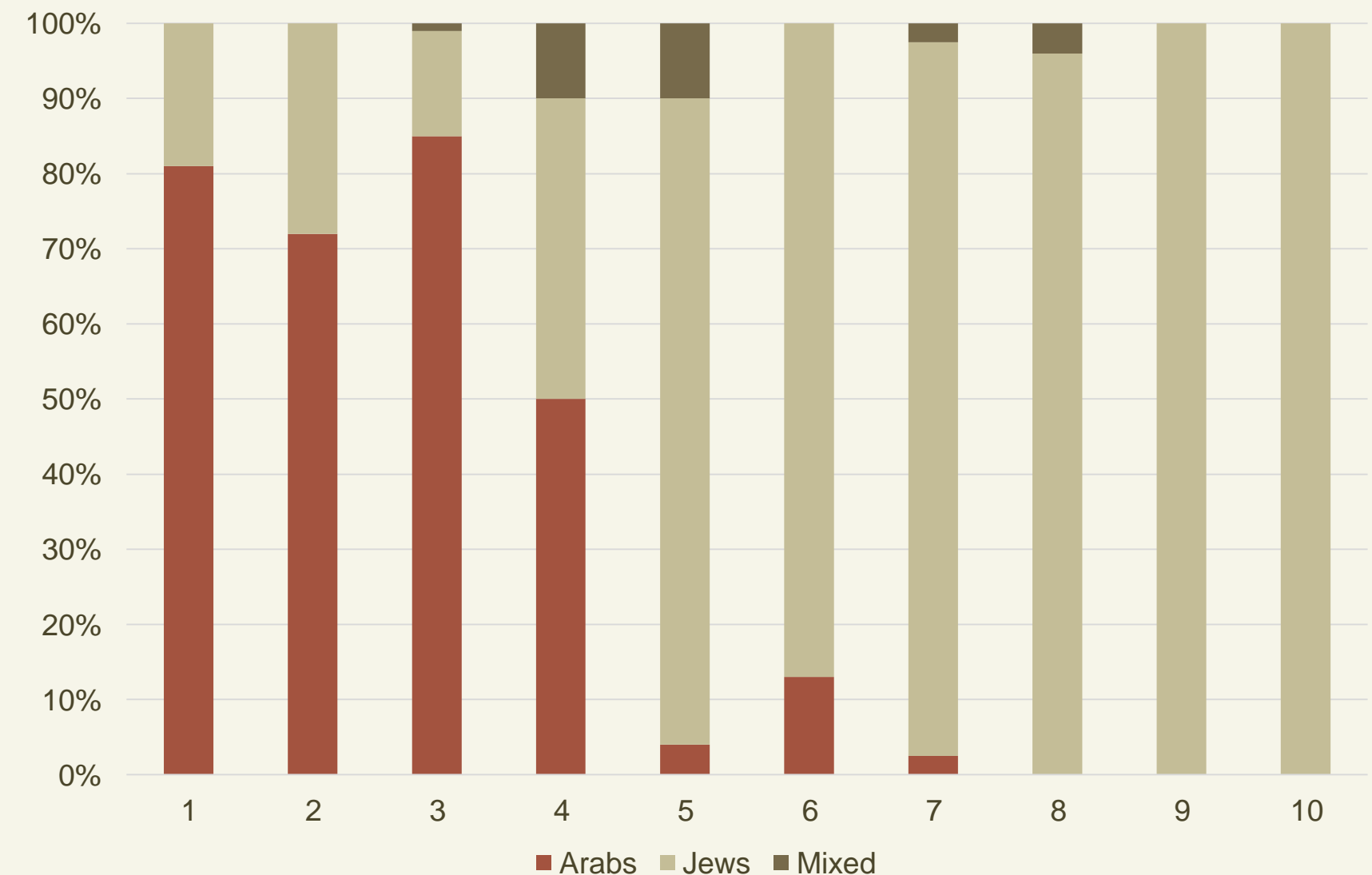
CAMPUS CLIMATE AT ISRAELI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

- **Increased enrolment** in Israeli HE (CBS, 2023)
- Likely **the first point of prolonged contact** between Jewish-Israelis and Arab-Palestinians (Hager & Jabareen, 2016);
- Campuses perceived as **foreign, often hostile environment** by PAIs (Mansour, 2024):
  - **Militarised campuses** (Sa'di-Ibraheem, 2021);
  - Vast majority of teaching done in **Hebrew** and minimal usage of **Arabic** (Amara et al., 2016);
  - **Student perceptions in statistics** (Abraham Initiatives, 2020; Mansour, 2024):
    - Around half report experiencing discrimination;
    - 72% do not feel that their institution is a fair place;
    - 68% do not feel that their institution's decisions are inclusive.

THE MAY 2021 EVENTS

Credit: New Yorker

- **Two main flashpoints:**

  1. Threats of forced eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the East Jerusalemite neighborhood of **Sheikh Jarrah** and **increased settler–violence**;

  2. Restrictions on Muslim worshippers' **access to Al–Aqsa mosque** and Damascus Gate during Ramadan, and **repeated raids into the mosque** between the 6th and the 10th of May.

- **In retaliation, Hamas fired rockets into Israel, prompting an Israeli airstrikes campaign on the Gaza Strip. This lasted for 11 days (10th – 21st of May)**
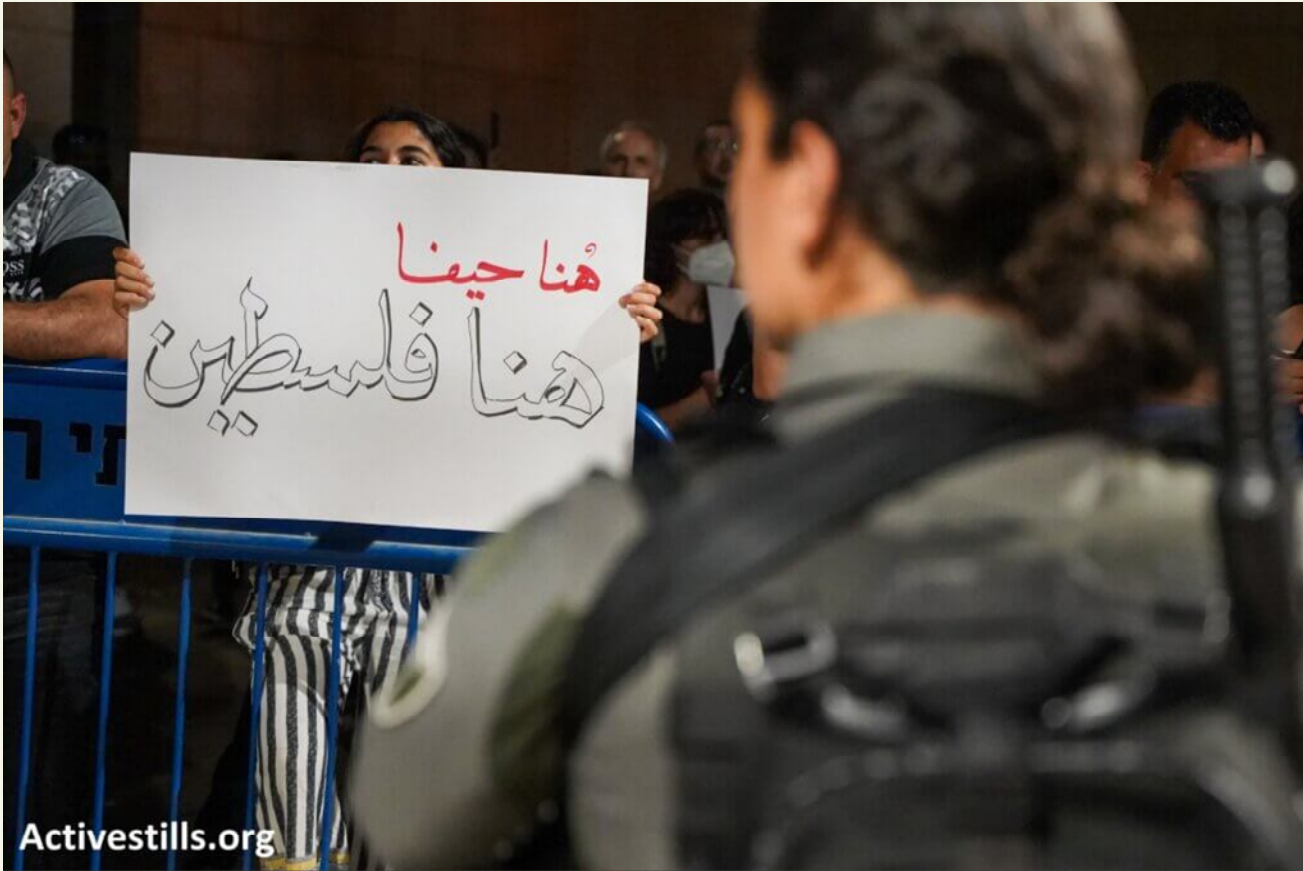

Credit: Mahmoud Illean/AP

THE MAY 2021 EVENTS

هنا حيفا
هنا فلسطين

Activestills.org

Credit: Active stills on X


دمنا غالي

Credit: Mati Milstein

- Meanwhile, **unprecedented protests** were held across dozens of towns and cities inside Israel by Palestinian Arab citizens, accompanied by **intense social media grassroots campaigning**;
- The protests quickly turned **violent and deadly**, with intensifying clashes between PAIs, Jewish–Israelis and the Israeli police:
  - Particularly intense in **mixed cities**;
  - **Israeli police responded** to protesters harshly using "**unnecessary and excessive force**" (Amnesty International, 2021);
  - **Two PAIs killed**: one in Lydd and one in Umm el-Fahem (both cases closed with no indictments);
  - Widespread **looting and rioting**;
  - Campaign of **arrests** to crackdown on PAI protesters.

How did Palestinian Arab students in Israeli universities experience the events of May 2021?

METHODS

- **Constructivist grounded theory approach** (Charmaz, 2014; 2017);
- **Theoretical sampling**: constructing theory rather than sample representativeness;
- **Recruitment** via social media channels and snowballing:
    - Difficulty recruiting due to sensitivity of research question;
- **Twenty interviews between May and September 2023**:
    - Students (n=12),
    - Academics (n=5),
    - Members of civil society organisations (n=3).
- **One main interview question**: "tell me what you remember from the events of May 2021"
    - Varying prompts as the interviews progressed
- The aim is to gain insight into students' experiences and **the narratives constructed around them**;
- **Interviews in batches of three**.

METHODS – STAGES OF ANALYSIS
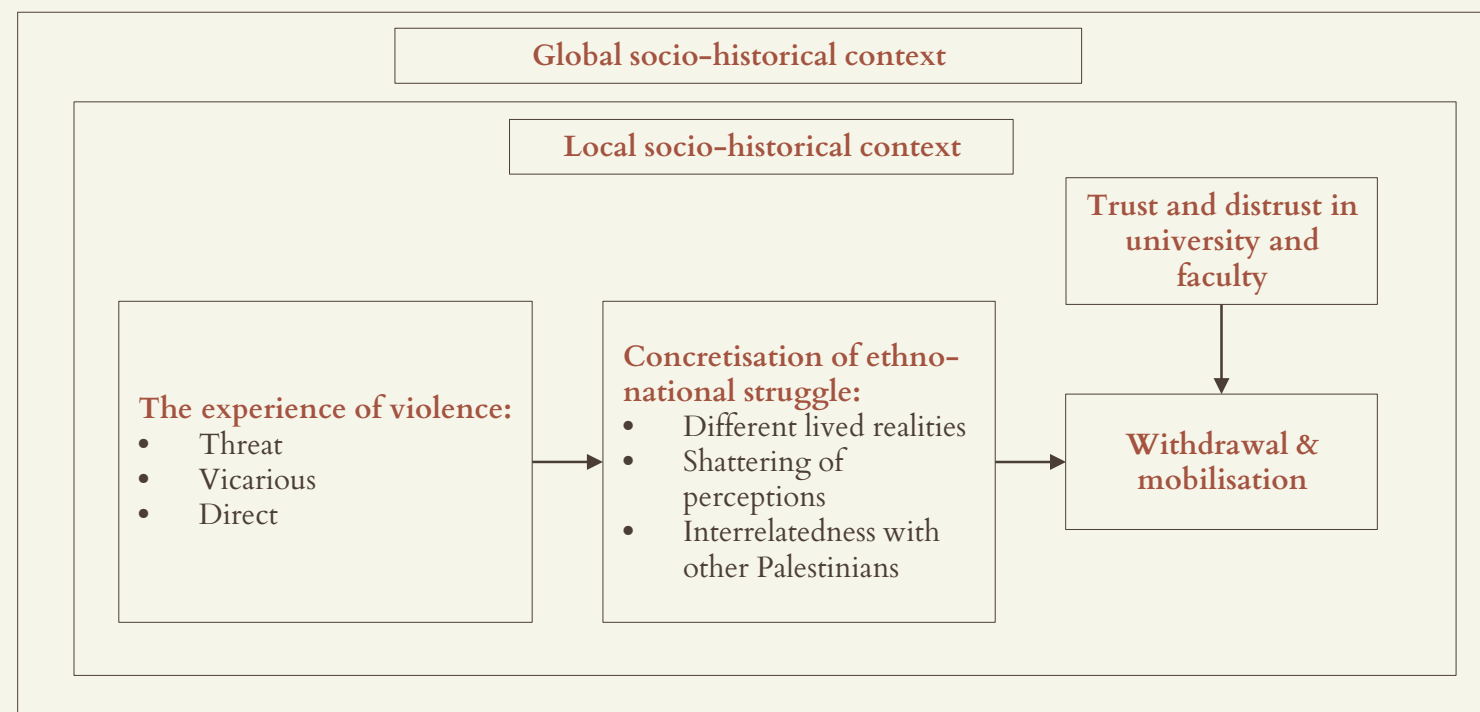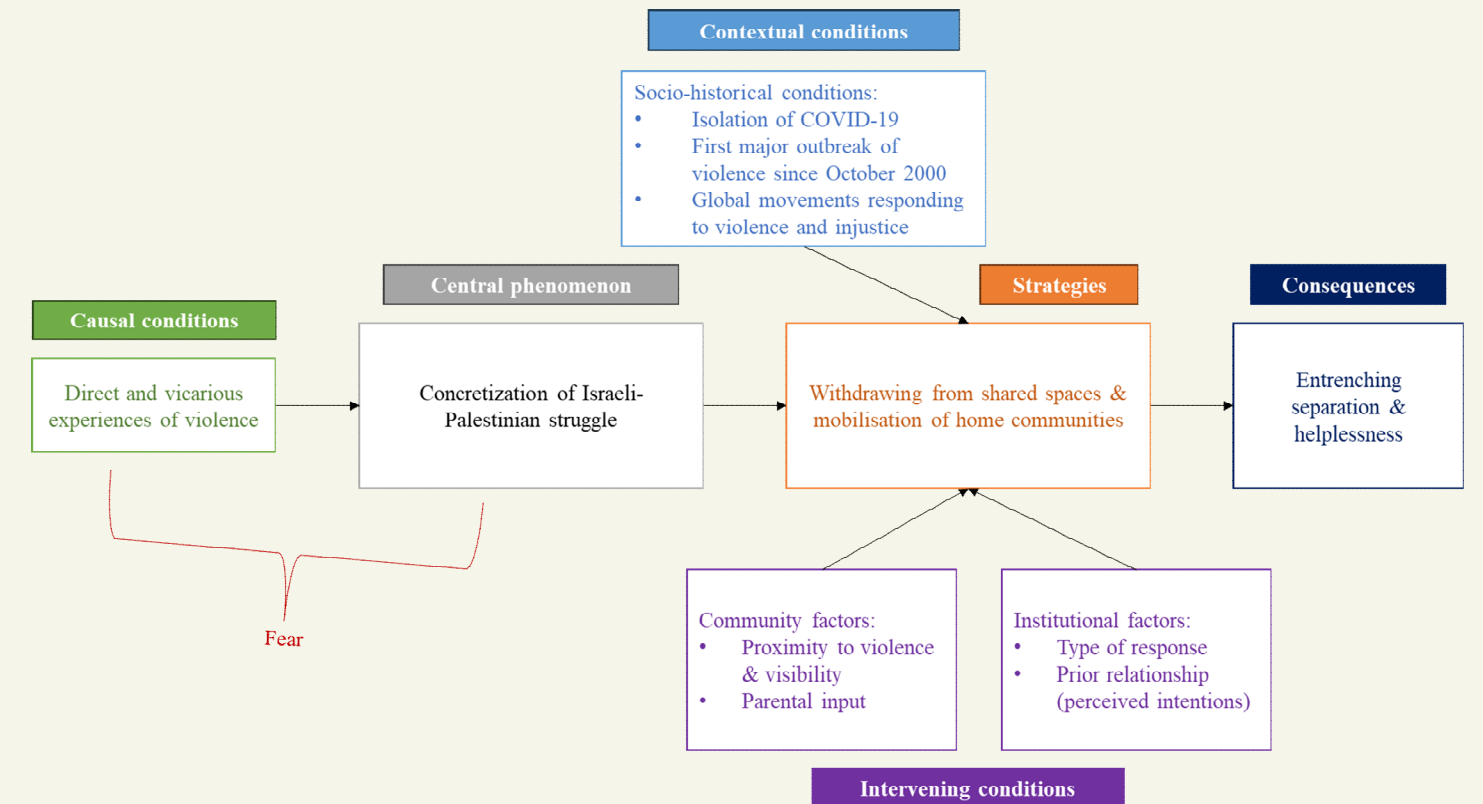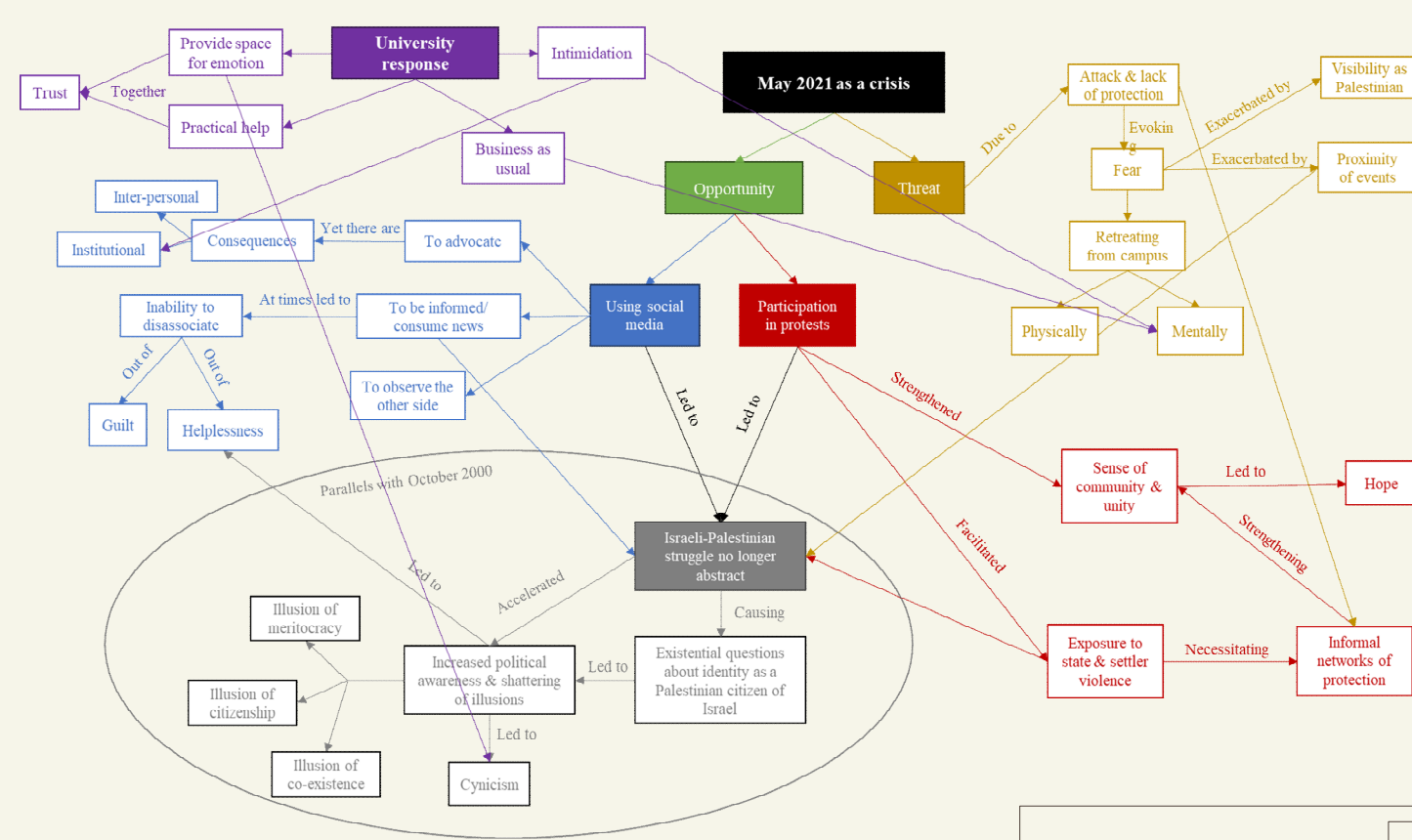
REFLEXIVITY: RESEARCH UNDER *QAHR*

- **Insider–Outsider researcher continuum** (Breen, 2007; Greene, 2014)

- **Writing up the analysis**: How to write about the violence of 2021 while embroiled in the violence of 2023?

- **Research under** *qahr* قهر – two uses of the word:
  - The act of *qahr*: (i.e., to subjugate or to subdue) systemic persecution and crackdown on dissent (Adalah, 2024; Gordon & Green, 2024; Morris, 2023);
  - The feeling of being under *qahr* – a mixture of grief, anger, helplessness, all while being unable to express it.

DATA ANALYSIS – THEORETICAL MODEL

Global socio–historical context

Local socio–historical context

Trust and distrust in university and faculty

The experience of violence:
- Threat
- Vicarious
- Direct

Concretisation of ethno–national struggle:
- Different lived realities
- Shattering of perceptions
- Interrelatedness with other Palestinians

Withdrawal & mobilisation
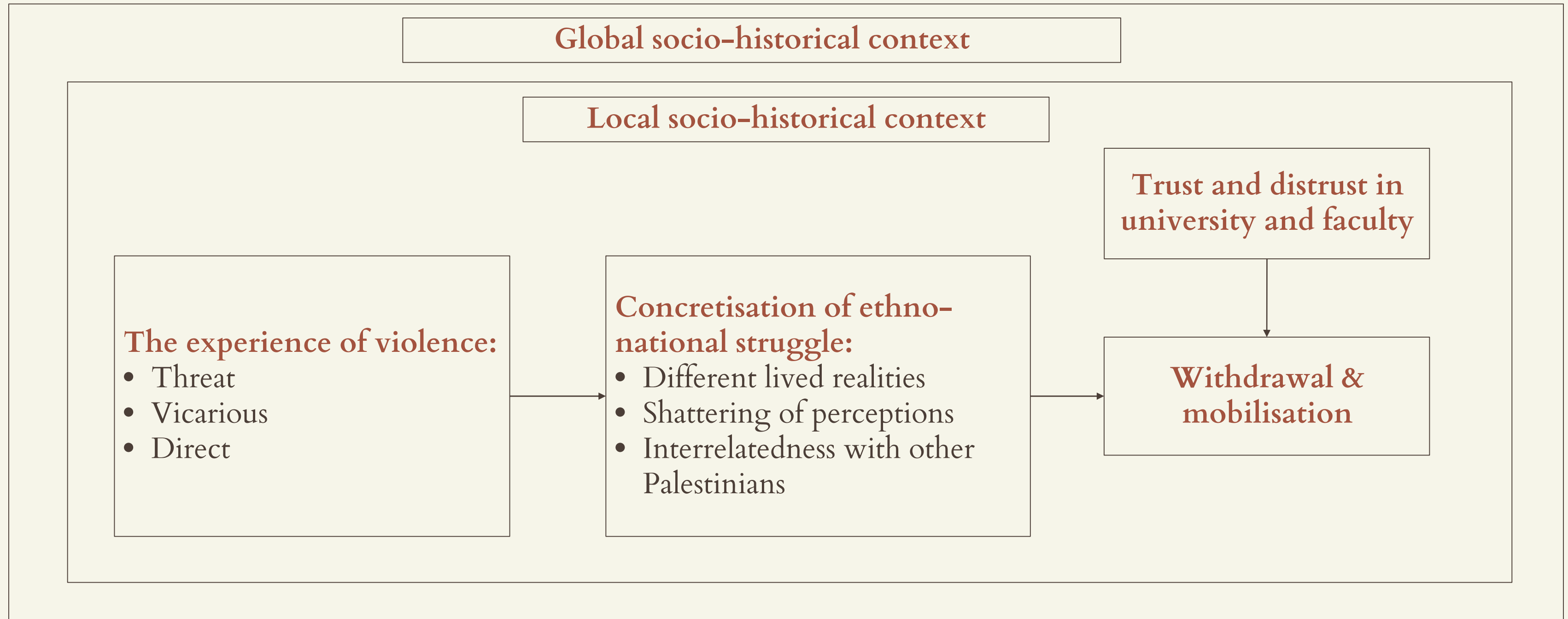
I. THE EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

- **Looming threat of violence**
  - "I was so afraid. I was afraid for my brothers whenever they left the house. Everyone was checking in on everyone... There was this street I passed by. The next day it was reported that there was a lynching attack at the same spot. It could have been me."
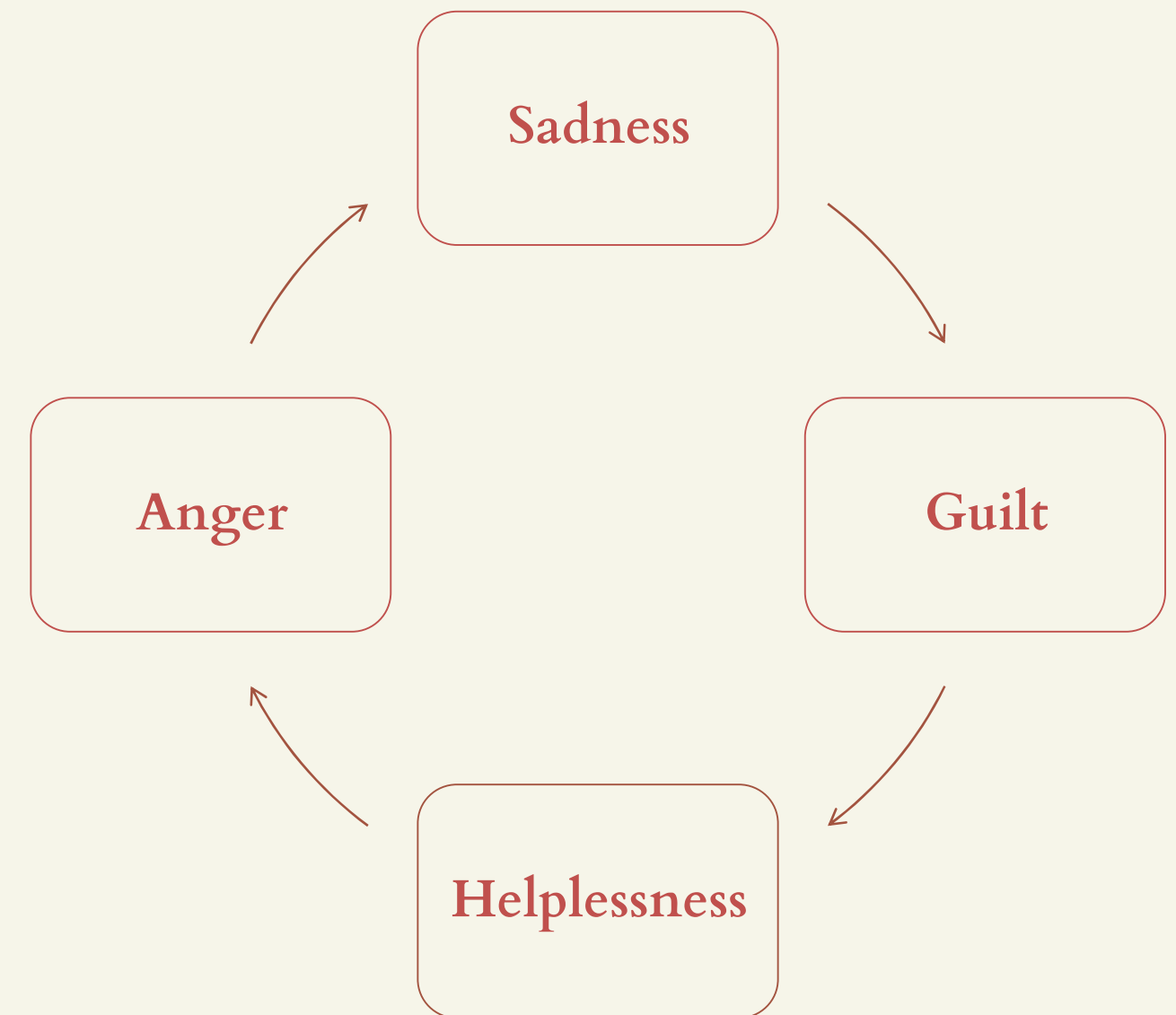
I. THE EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

- **Direct physical and verbal violence**
  - o **In protests**: "We had 10 or 15 minutes of peaceful protest. After that, it turned violent. [The police] arrested so many people. And [they] beat so many people, wholeheartedly beat them. And it kept escalating: grenades, rubber bullets and skunk water... I was shocked... I had been to protests before, but never with clashes as violent as this… I used to see this kind of thing on social media. But when it happens right next to you, you understand that it can happen to anyone. It doesn't matter if you're a student or a child or whatever. As long as you are Palestinian, you are a target."
  - o **Online targeting by extremist groups**: "On social media, extremist groups would take someone's name and where they live and incite against them, to hurt them, physically harm them. They would say 'This person protested or raised the flag or wrote something on Facebook.' And they would incite the universities against the students, pressure them to take disciplinary action… Or they would go to students' employers, tell them 'You have an employee who was protesting.'" (staff member of civil society organisation)

I. THE EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

- **Vicarious violence – social media as a double-edged sword**
  - ○ "I saw this video of a father pulling his child out of the rubble. I started weeping like a baby. I don't remember ever watching a video and instantly crying that way. Just this wave of sadness over our people and what is happening to us."
  - ○ "I felt a national duty – but I didn't know what I could do. The only thing I could think of was to raise awareness. But even that, you feel it is not enough. You see people dying, souls being lost – I don't want to start crying now, but it was really difficult. You feel you must do something, but what? How?"

Sadness

Guilt

Helplessness

Anger

II. CONCRETISATION OF STRUGGLE

- **The threat and experience of violence made the wider ethnonational struggle that is usually dormant and implicit in students' daily lives palpable and concrete**
  - o "The chaos reached us; it was under all our houses. It was bizarre to suddenly hear the sound of bombing and hear that there is a fire here and police officers there, and a helicopter above the houses – it truly felt like what was happening in Sheikh Jarrah was happening in my village too."

- **Three interconnected processes:**
  - a) Realisation of different realities
  - b) Shattering of perceptions
  - c) Fostering interrelatedness with other Palestinians

II. CONCRETISATION OF STRUGGLE

- **Realisation of different realities**:
  - "I would finish my lectures and go to a protest because I've been sitting for six hours with people who are talking about how they are reservists and they're going to Gaza, and I can see on their Instagram where they did their military service… Going to the protest was one way to let out some of the anger, but it also put me even more on the ground, in reality, where it was even worse than you thought… How do they expect me to go to a lecture the next morning and want to learn?"
  - "After the ceasefire in Gaza, universities returned to normal. The [Jewish–Israeli] students returned because, for them, the danger went away, but for us, it was very difficult because there were still people protesting and getting arrested. In our city, there was a young man who was shot and killed, so the events were still very tangible… I remember we were at the funeral – a very big funeral, around fifty thousand people, and at the same time I had a physiology lecture. It felt like two separate worlds."

II. CONCRETISATION OF STRUGGLE

- **Shattering perceptions – rethinking identit(ies):**
    - "I started thinking about how fragile this co-existence that's always talked about is. I'm kind of happy that this bubble burst. If we don't confront things and talk about them properly, it's all for nothing."
    - "My perspective changed a lot… In the past, when I thought of Land Day or the Intifada, I thought in terms unrelated to me. The state *was* racist, not that it still is. The state *killed* Arabs, not that it still does. I thought of it in past terms, as part of the collective that I come from, that my parents lived through these things, but I won't. These were the first events that were politically real to me. I realised that there is a clear line [connecting] the Nakba, what my parents went through, and what I am going through now."

II. CONCRETISATION OF STRUGGLE

- **Fostering interrelatedness with other Palestinians:**
  - "I think the tides turned, and it reminded us that we are one… I felt during that period what it means to be a Palestinian people, and that I am from it… So, I feel that this is one thing that is positive about that time: there was more awareness among people in my generation. If there was someone who was wavering, didn't have a [political] perspective – after the events, there was no more doubt."

III. WITHDRAWAL & MOBILISATION

- **Physical withdrawal:**
  - Mass exodus of PAI students from campuses and return to their home communities
- **Mental withdrawal:**
  - "I attended classes on Zoom, but I wasn't really there because I was filled with rage – at this duality of all this chaos and violence outside but we are dealing with one another in such civility [in classrooms]… I would attend classes but wouldn't engage. I was on Instagram, Facebook, sharing things all the time. Writing, talking to my friends, trying to process what was going on."
- **Mobilisation:** organizing buses for students, disseminating knowledge about protesters' rights, setting up emergency committees to communicate needs with universities.
  - "There were some great initiatives by students – to set up a support system of our own… While it was a very ugly time, I also think that some beautiful things emerged that I didn't expect."

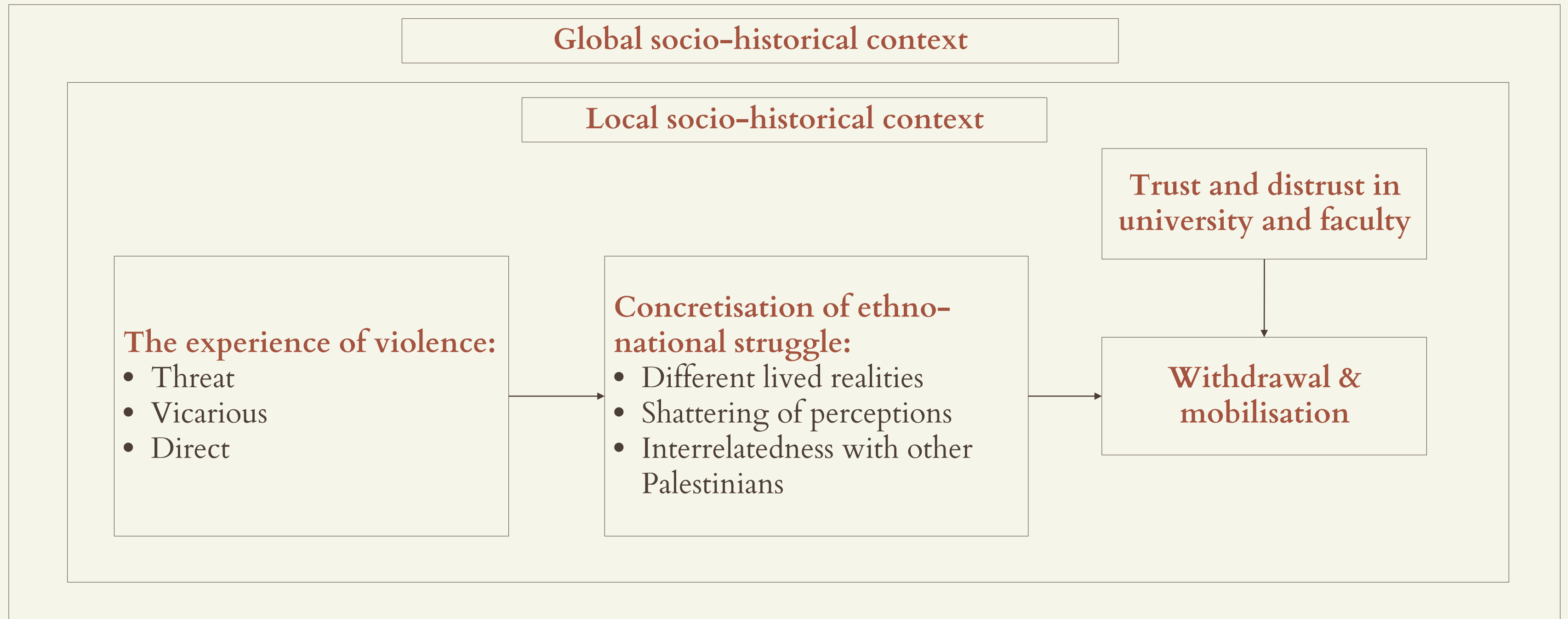# IV. TRUST & DISTRUST OF UNIVERSITIES & FACULTY MEMBERS

- **Climate of cynicism:**
  - "With everything that is going on now, it is very clear to me that no one cares about us. It's so funny that academia now is so recruited to the fight for democracy, and you realize how much hypocrisy there is. If you are so democratic and enlightened as you claim, and equality is such a core value to you – where have you been for seventy years?... You start to understand that there isn't a place for you, and your struggles are not a part of the collective awareness... You see that when it burns for them, they're willing to go far. It's sad but not disappointing because I have no expectations."
  - Offering only emotional support seen as a "containment strategy."
- **Power of faculty members in fostering inclusion:**
  - Individual assurances and check-ins.
  - Role of PAI academics in mediating between universities and students, despite their own worries.

DISCUSSION

Global socio–historical context

Local socio–historical context

Trust and distrust in university and faculty

The experience of violence:
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- Direct

Concretisation of ethno–national struggle:
- Different lived realities
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- Interrelatedness with other Palestinians

Withdrawal & mobilisation

DISCUSSION

- **Components of identity that are under threat tend to be amplified** (Hadzic et al., 2020; Merrilees et al., 2014);

- Violence **permeates** campuses and could even **originate** from them.

- **Cycles** of fear, anger, guilt, helplessness and cynicism.

- Direct violence may subside, but **the processes triggered by it continue**.

- Actions of universities and faculty members matter – and **students pay close attention** to them.

- **Questions for further reflection**:
  - 2021 as a precursor to 2023–2024?
  - Shift in self-perception represents a new political generation? (Rabinowitz & Abu-Baker, 2005)

Thank you!

Happy to stay in contact--
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