

**Hammad, J. & Tribe, R. (2020) Adaptive Coping During Protracted Political Conflict, War and Military Blockade in Gaza. *International Review of Psychiatry***

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**Abstract:** Identifying culturally-relevant concepts and coping mechanisms can help protect civilian wellbeing. This study explores how seven professional Palestinian university graduates in the Gaza Strip (occupied Palestinian territories) cope with war, military occupation, military blockade and the challenges of living in a conflict-affected area. Participants were interviewed to determine whether culturally specific modes of coping were used. Thematic analysis was applied. The use of resistance and more specifically, *sumud*<sup>1</sup>, being steadfast and persevering, were identified alongside the motivation to persevere and other adaptive responses to living conditions. Coping strategies identified in this study include adapting, problem-solving, accepting reality, exercising patience, utilising social support, and faith in God (*iman*) and religion. The implications of this study and the relevance of the findings to mental health and disaster relief are considered.

Key words: coping; culture; Gaza; political conflict; *sumud*

### **Introduction**

Understanding how civilians cope and identifying their sources of resilience can promote an understanding of how populations deal with adversity and it can help protect civilian mental health and wellbeing (e.g. Inter–Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2007; Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser, & Boyce, 2008). Mental health and wellbeing is intimately connected to injustice, oppression, power and social systems (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011). Integral to promoting wellbeing is a human rights and social justice approach that addresses the causes of civilian suffering in conflict-affected areas (e.g. structural inequalities, oppression, human and economic insecurity) (Kagan et al., 2011; Martín-Baró, 1994). While a political intervention is needed to end conflict, interventions and constructs to help civilians are needed in the interim that foster resilience and positive forms of coping. Studies in conflict-affected areas in the Middle East exploring resilience and positive coping are few in number (i.e., Afana, Tremblay, Ghannam, Ronsbo, & Veronese, 2018; Atallah, 2017; Marie, Hannigan, & Jones, 2017; Nuwayhid, Zurayk, Yamout, & Cortas 2011). Much of the research in the Gaza Strip has relied upon Western, quantitative scales, which can

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<sup>1</sup> *Sumud* is a culturally valued construct within Palestinian society and refers to perseverance or steadfastness (Atallah, 2017).

be problematic as these measures have not been designed to measure coping with protracted conflict, or capture non-Western ways of coping (Hundt, Chatty, Thabet, & Abuateya, 2004).

Studying indigenous views and experiences of trauma and coping can offer new ways of understanding both. Forms of coping and resilience are influenced by culture, religion and systemic contexts and vary across regions as cultures have different understandings of resilience, wellbeing, and healing (Fernando, 2014). Thus, a universal application of Western psychology and mental health concepts in non-Western settings may not coincide with local understandings and consequently, displace local knowledge and indigenous ways of healing (Fernando, 2014; Tribe & Melluish, 2014). Recognising and understanding how coping, resilience and healing is conceptualised, expressed and cultivated across cultures is essential when offering interventions. It is also vital to identify cultural modes of coping, especially those that support meaning and the management of distress, to embed or integrate these concepts into psychological/mental health services as well as disaster and emergency responses (Fernando, 2014; IASC, 2007). This can strengthen engagement and provide culturally sensitive interventions that incorporate local knowledge and practices.

Accordingly, this study sought to (1) understand how Palestinians cope with the challenges of living in a conflict-affected area, and (2) identify culturally specific core constructs of resilience.

### **Culturally Relevant Modes of Coping**

Regionally, *sumud* (in Arabic) refers to perseverance or steadfastness and is culturally valued within Palestinian society (Atallah, 2017). It is the psychological capacity to endure and resist occupation (Shehadeh, 2015), as well as the determination to exist by remaining rooted to the land (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). *Sumud* is at the heart of resilience for Palestinians (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008) and its expression is associated with persevering in difficult socio-political, colonial contexts (Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014). A study conducted in the West Bank explored the resilience processes among Palestinian refugee families living under Israeli occupation for multiple generations (Atallah, 2017) and found that family resilience was connected to indigenous cultural constructs of *sumud/perseverance*. It was also linked to *muqawama*, resistance to the military occupation and *awda*, a return to cultural roots despite ongoing and historical settler colonialism. Examples of *sumud* included neighbours helping to rebuild homes after home demolitions, and families continuing to apply for permits to cope with separations (Atallah, 2017). Families described remaining steadfast by building community capacity as part of a crisis response and resource distribution (Atallah, 2017). *Sumud* has also been found to help Palestinians endure interrogation and torture in Israeli prisons (Meari, 2015). See Hammad and Tribe (2020a) for an overview of the literature on culturally informed resilience and coping in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt).

## **The Present Study**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of seven Muslim Palestinian professional university graduates (four male and three female participants) aged 24 to 39, living in the Gaza Strip. Participants were recruited by a Gazan non-governmental organisation (NGO). Since birth, all participants have lived under military occupation and through prolonged and heightened periods of political

unrest during both intifadas, including four wars in the last seven years. Participants were interviewed nine months after the 2014 war ended, at which point participants had been living under an illegal military blockade for over seven years, with no freedom of movement in an environment with high levels of politically induced poverty, unemployment and food insecurity, vital infrastructure lacking, limited post-war reconstruction and lack of access to resources (e.g. employment, electricity). See Hammad and Tribe (2020a) for further details on the history and context. The University of East London and the NGO granted ethical approval.

### **Method**

Seven semi-structured individual interviews were conducted over the internet in Arabic, with a bilingual native Palestinian interpreter. It was not possible to conduct face to face interviews as Gaza's borders were closed; thus, the researcher and interpreter were based in the United Kingdom (UK), while participants were based in the Gaza Strip. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Arabic, and translated to English. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. Analysis of the translations was undertaken by the first author. This was reviewed by the second author and a third independent psychologist for theme confirmation.

### **Results**

Where there is evidence of more than one coping strategy within the extract or how it connects to theme one, this will serve as having evidenced the other coping strategies mentioned; therefore fewer extracts may be presented in certain sections.

#### ***Theme one: Motivation to persevere***

All participants were motivated to persevere despite the challenging living conditions, as opposed to giving up on life (e.g. suicide). The theme 'motivation to persevere' was connected to the theme 'adaptive responses to living conditions' (see Figure 1). This theme included two sub-themes: the 'motivation to survive and take care of oneself and one's family' and the 'motivation to develop, progress, and achieve'.

#### ***Motivation to survive and take care of oneself and one's family***

The 'motivation to survive and take care of oneself and one's family' was linked to the coping strategies 'adaptation' and 'problem-solving'. In terms of coping with the livelihood dilemmas and unemployment in Gaza, many participants accepted the reality, adapted, and actively problem-solved by being flexible regarding where they worked because of their motivation to persevere, survive, and look after themselves and their family.

*I graduated from university and looked for a job in any field. I didn't insist on a job related to my specialism because the situation is very difficult here. ...I wanted to look for a job so I have a source of income to spend on myself and my family.*

The motivation to survive and take care of oneself and family was also reflected.

*You can say it's my will, determination and insistence to challenge the hard situation we live in the Gaza Strip. I try to afford the minimum household needs ...life requirements, the basics; to eat to drink to get dressed.*

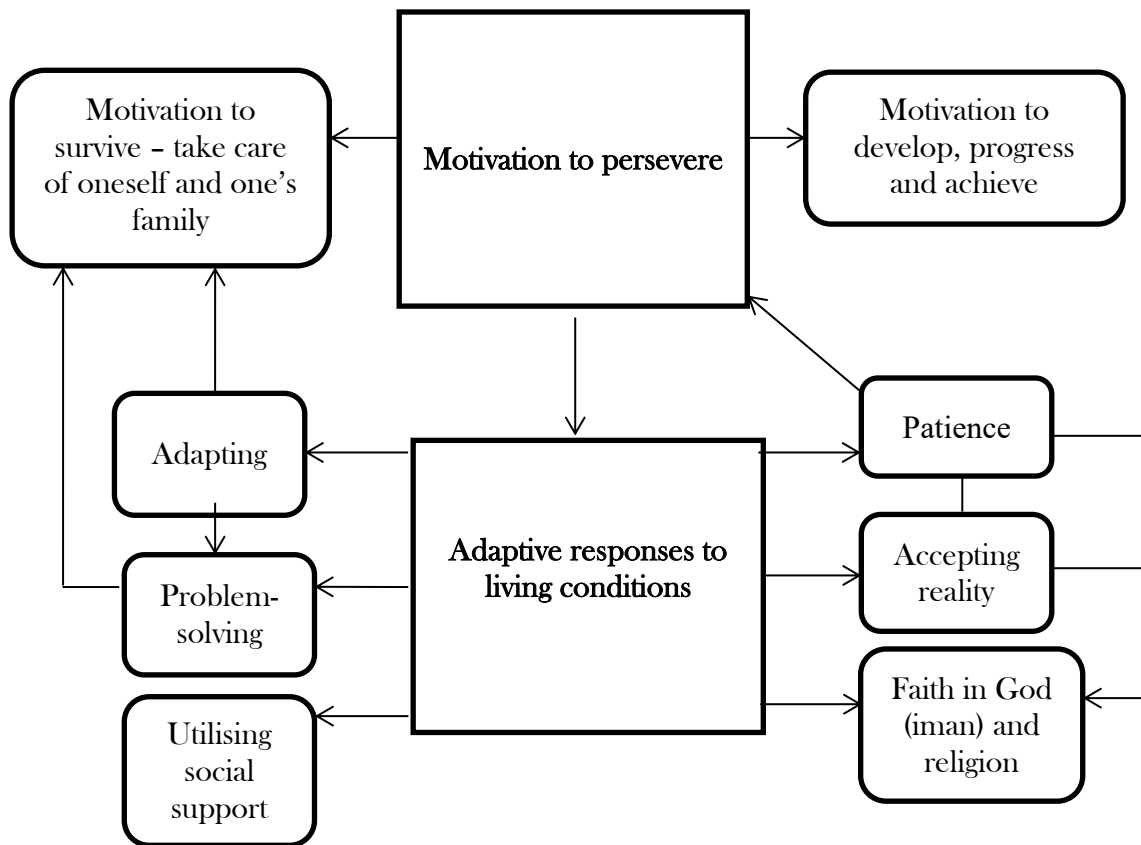


Figure 1. Thematic map

Participants spoke of attempting to seek safety in an environment that could offer them no safety or guarantee that they would survive. They spoke of trying to avoid being killed, whether it involved staying in their homes or seeking safer locations. Their motivation to survive propelled them to actively cope in situations of danger during the war, by influencing how and where they sought refuge, through the application of problem-solving where possible and, utilising social support in the form of practical assistance.

*We were afraid that our place might be targeted and we might die all together...I went to my friend's place, my sons left and each of my daughters were in a different place. My two sons went to sleep in the mosque...*

Participants described adapting and problem-solving to cope with the lack of crucial needs required for survival (e.g. water) and making do with food supplies at home; the use of these coping strategies appeared to be driven by their motivation to stay alive.

*...we managed everything from what we had at home like food, drinks...we used to eat anything, drink anything...*

### *Motivation to develop, progress and achieve*

The challenges of living in a conflict-affected area concern economic insecurity, in addition to reduced opportunities to achieve and progress. Participants emphasised the importance of, and motivation to hold onto one's dreams and ambitions, despite suffering and hardship.

*...I learnt that its severity, pain and ache shouldn't diminish your dreams and ambitions. ...I learnt that the ordeals and the hard conditions we live have to strengthen our capabilities, possibilities...*

The desire and motivation to improve their situation and progress in life featured in all interviews. Participants spoke of young people's motivation and their own to improve their life and their situation via working, so that they could support themselves and their family.

*Youths develop themselves and say we hope to be offered more jobs if we developed ourselves.*

### ***Theme two: Adaptive responses to living conditions***

Participants applied adaptive responses to help them cope with the hardship stemming from living in a conflict-affected area and under military blockade, and to alleviate suffering where possible to make life easier to live. There were several coping strategies (sub-themes) identified: 'adapting', 'problem-solving', 'accepting reality', 'patience', 'utilising social support', and 'faith in God (iman) and religion'.

#### *Adapting*

Participants described adapting when there were no other choices available, as well as acceptance of the reality and learning to live with the situation.

*We have to live within this situation and adapt with it...our situation forces us to adapt with it even when we are internally unsatisfied.*

'Problem-solving' connected to 'adaptation'. Participants described how they learnt to live within a deficient environment and with movement restrictions; they adapted and problem-solved to cope with life under occupation and blockade.

*We try to find solutions for whatever difficulties we face and we adapt with them. ...it's been ages for this siege. We got used to everything, the lack of travelling, power and work*

#### *Problem-solving*

All participants reported adopting a solution-focused approach and problem-solving when difficulties were encountered. All described themselves and others as actively seeking out alternatives for what was unavailable in Gaza to help them cope with the deficient living conditions. Problem-solving appeared to stem from their motivation to alleviate suffering.

*...we try to find an alternative if something isn't available...for example, when there's no power, we depend on batteries to light the house...surely this decreases our suffering...*

### *Accepting reality*

Acceptance featured in the majority of interviews. It did not mean giving up or approving of the conditions in Gaza; instead, it referred to patience – steadfastness/sumud - and an acknowledgement that no control could be exerted over the political conflict and its consequences. Individuals cannot influence the systems which govern their lives; thus, they are forced to accept reality, become patient and steadfast, and adapt in order to cope and live life under occupation. Still, acceptance does not bring relief as it might elsewhere; participants highlighted their unhappiness and human insecurity in spite of their expression of acceptance.

*This is the fact but we have to cope with it...if you rejected it, you won't be able to do anything, you won't be able to change because this is the policy of the whole country and the sufferance of the whole nation; it's a siege over Gaza Strip not only over me... this is the reality; a fact that was imposed on me; therefore, I have to impose reality on myself and to respond to it in a way...that should not limit my dreams, possibilities or abilities.*

*Simply we accepted this situation anyway we have no other choices. We have to live within this situation and adapt with it... We lack the psychological comfort but we're forced to live.*

Accepting reality and adapting was also reflected in the compromises participants made regarding the limited choices available to them, such as working in non-professional jobs.

*I'm a graduate and it's not suitable for me to work as a cleaner, for example. Nonetheless, because of our real situation, I'm obliged to do that to offer myself an income...*

### *Patience*

Patience was linked to the theme of 'motivation to persevere'. When a participant was asked what helps people to cope with the difficulties in Gaza, she spoke of how they use patience to cope with the difficult living conditions. She mentioned patience as standing fast (sumud), which appeared to link to the motivation to persevere and endure the hardship and suffering from the occupation.

*We are patient towards the things we pass by. These things need patience. The more we're patient, the greater the reward is. It's also standing fast (sumud).*

References inferred that the military occupation and blockade were designed to create suffering, with the view of people accepting the occupation and forfeiting land rights. Yet, people resisted and drew upon patience to endure and stand fast, exercising sumud, and cope with the lack of control and choices.

*Our patience, standing fast and staying in our lands are resistance ways for sure. We didn't escape from our country or give it up. Our education, when we learn and develop ourselves...even in the war, we tolerated more than them...I consider this resistance.*

*There are difficulties; great suffering in Gaza...We have to be patient because there are no alternatives.*

The awareness that others are worse off than them, through the use of comparison strategies helped participants cope with difficulties by fostering patience and gratefulness for what they had. There was an awareness that their loss, suffering, and hardship could have been greater.

*When someone compares his situation to others', he'll feel better about himself. Whatever his case is, it's still better than many others' situations. These things make us patient and satisfied with our situation.*

*I learnt to be patient and of course to thank Allah [God] firstly...For example, our neighbour's house was destroyed but ours wasn't. So our catastrophe is less. Those things lessen other things.*

#### *Utilising social support*

All participants mentioned that social support helped them cope with the challenges of living under a blockade and in a conflict-affected area, including through conditions of poverty and homelessness. Social support included emotional support, help and care from others, practical assistance, and financial support.

*I learnt how to cope with economical, war, or psychological...of course the family had an important role. They helped and supported me in many things to overcome the pains, problems and difficulties.*

*[After the war] my own house couldn't be inhabited; therefore, I moved to live at my relative's house.*

Community relations and social support increased during times of war according to some participants.

*...when there's a war, the relations are stronger than when there's no war.*

*...the social relations were very warm in the war.*

Despite the risk of being killed, people visited the bereaved during the war, to console them and offer them emotional support, which was considered resistance to the occupation.

*People support each other psychologically by raising morale. This is one way of peaceful resistance. People support each other and help each other...in the war or*

*during the war, there were a lot of martyrs<sup>2</sup> and injured people. People used to visit the martyrs' families. Although it was very risky, they used to go to console them...*

### *Faith in God (iman) and religion*

The majority of participants remembered God during their interviews. 'Faith in God (iman) and religion' was linked to the coping strategies of 'accepting reality' and 'patience' as highlighted below. Some referred to the concept of iman (strong religious faith); they elaborated on how their faith helped them cope with challenges and they praised God for them having the capacity to accept life. They conceptualised this as their fate and what God willed it to be. Some participants referenced that their faith helped foster patience and unconditional gratefulness to God, regardless of the suffering.

*In the Gaza Strip, praise be to Allah, it's our nature to accept life because God planned this for us. Patience is good and helpful, and we thank God for the good and bad times...although the situation is very tough...*

## **Discussion**

The study investigated how Palestinians coped with the challenges of living in a conflict-affected area under military blockade in the Gaza Strip. It highlighted coping strategies such as adapting, problem-solving, accepting reality, exercising patience, utilising social support, and relying on faith, supporting existing research on coping with conflict-related trauma/stressors in the oPt (e.g. Afana et al., 2018; Joma'a & Thabet, 2015; Khamis, 2013; Thabet et al., 2015, 2016; Thabet & Thabet, 2015). More critically, our findings suggest there are several positive resources (e.g. religion, sumud, social support, perseverance) available from which individuals draw. These stem from the motivation to survive and persevere, as well as the motivation to alleviate suffering, which supports the tenet of Kira, Alawneh, Aboumediene, Lewandowski, and Laddis's (2014) model that in the situation of collective trauma, the will to survive is present and engenders various strategies to cope with distress and respond to oppression and existential threats. These findings dovetail with studies showing that the will to survive underpins the use of coping strategies in adverse conditions (e.g. Kira et al., 2014). Coping strategies can facilitate this process as successful coping contributes to survival (Haj-Yahia, 2007).

Our findings also contribute to understandings of resistance, endurance, and sumud. Richter-Devroe (2011) found that sumud was centred on the affirmation of life in a context of occupation that makes it pervasively difficult to fulfil an ordinary life; indeed, the right to lead a normal joyful life was considered resistance by Palestinians. Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008) also found that for young Palestinians, resiliency was rooted in the capacity to make life as normal as possible, and within a Palestinian context, suffering and enduring must be interpreted at a collective and individual level. The will to survive cannot be separated from political resistance (Barber, 2001); this is reflected in the Palestinian saying "to exist is to resist" (Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014, p. 86). Yet, surviving and persevering in the oPt may hold another meaning and be construed as a form of resistance to the occupation (Atallah, 2017). To illustrate, Atallah (2017) found that Palestinians resisted by evaluating risks, and making

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, martyr refers to a person believed to be in heaven, e.g. a civilian who has died in war/conflict.



difficult choices and sacrifices to protect basic needs (e.g. safety, employment, food, water, shelter, etc.). In our study, participants exercised *sumud* through enduring, patient perseverance and remaining on their land, while others considered everyday acts a form of resistance, such as attaining education (e.g. Arafat & Musleh, 2006), offering social support, visiting the bereaved, being patient, and tolerating military attacks. Consistent with the literature, patiently persevering in a difficult socio-political colonial context and resisting the occupation is part of being steadfast and an expression of control (Aaron & Hill, 2016; Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014).

A view on religion and its encouragement in coping was also prevalent. Atallah (2017) found Palestinians in the West Bank grounded their patience and determination in religious faith; Afana et al. (2018) found religious beliefs helped Palestinians cope. Islam encourages persevering, patience, and acceptance with the decree of God regarding trials and tribulations and Muslims hold beliefs that their fate ('*qadr*') is written by God. As religion serves as a source of emotional support, it facilitates positive reinterpretation, meaning and hope (El-Islam, 2015) and offers an active way to cope. Religious meaning-making, religious concepts including '*iman*', religious coping, and faith as a source of resilience, support a body of literature regarding the ways in which *iman* and religious coping is expressed among Palestinians in the oPt (Afana et al., 2018; Barber et al., 2014; Kira et al., 2014; Thabet et al., 2013, 2015; Thabet & Thabet, 2015). Being grateful and appreciative for what one has, even during times of suffering and hardship, is promoted within Islam and known to foster trauma recovery among disaster survivors (Wang, Wu, & Tian, 2018). The religious construct of *iman* was found to be a source of resilience.

Social support helped participants meet emotional, social, and practical needs that aided coping and alleviated suffering and distress (e.g. Kira et al., 2014; Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). Relationships helped strengthen perseverance for Palestinian families (Atallah, 2017). During times of hardship, family solidarity, cohesiveness, and mutual support within the community are strengthened (Giacaman, Husseini, Gordon, & Awartani, 2004; Haj-Yahia, 2007) and enable survival (Giacaman, Shannon, Saab, Arya, & Boyce, 2007). For Palestinians, family is an essential social, cultural and religious institution (Barber et al., 2016). Consistent with research, social support increased during the war (Nuwayhid et al., 2011) and was considered a form of resistance to the occupation by some participants. When living under subjugation and control, individuals channel agency into ordinary behaviour, such as kindness, as expressions of defiance and resistance (Aaron & Hill, 2016).

Finally, individuals also showed an innate striving for growth, development, self-motivation and autonomy, even if their ambitions could not materialise. Research has found that achieving academically and the use of self-improvement (e.g. academic or personal) are a primary means of coping with life events in the oPt (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Hundt et al., 2004). Perhaps the motivation to develop, progress, and achieve is a form of resisting the occupation and coping with this loss; therefore, participants choose not to limit their ambitions. It could reflect a way of adapting, regulating, or managing the emotional distress of not being able to fulfil their ambitions in the current conditions and maintaining hope that they may be able to in the future.

### **Implications**

Our analysis offers insight into what coping strategies are used and the motivations which underpin them, drawing attention to the use of resistance, *iman* and *sumud*, as well as

more commonly known forms of coping, such as the use of relationships, using hope and a future orientation, and cognitive reappraisal. Such studies can inform psychological practise and research. It also challenges the typical discourse that views people living in war zones as ill functioning. Most research in this area adopts a trauma model, emphasising the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and the use of Western biomedical therapeutic interventions designed to treat it (Summerfield, 2000, 2008). The universal application of this model neglects indigenous understandings, practices and efforts towards health, wellbeing, and healing (Fernando, 2014), and conceals empowering aspects of the Palestinian experience, such as struggle and dignity (Meari, 2015). The guidelines for mental health responses in emergency settings recommended identifying and promoting positive coping strategies used in local cultures (IASC, 2007). Sumud can offer an alternative to the trauma paradigm that is in line with local ways of understandings and the promotion of resilience, strength and endurance in a hostile context. The exploration of sumud also addresses the need to identify and promote indigenous constructs in psychology to accurately reflect a range of coping mechanisms and human strengths.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While the small sample size limits generalisability, the validity gained by the detailed attention given to the accounts of a few individuals, especially from a hard-to-reach community, contributes an idiographic contextualised understanding in an under-researched area.

We urge more investigation into the construct of sumud; how it manifests, the processes that underpin and cultivate it, and how it assists with positive coping. How its promotion is possible via pilot interventions focused on communities' aims, values, beliefs, indigenous forms of healing, and national, religious, or cultural identity is of note. As faith, social support (e.g. Thabet et al., 2015), collective national identity (e.g. Abu-Soboh, 2011, unpublished dissertation cited in Makkawi, 2014), cultural roots, cultural rituals, family routines, commemoration days, and storytelling (Atallah, 2017) are sources of resilience, interventions to promote them are equally valuable. Thus, in partnership with local NGOs, practitioners developing and offering culturally sensitive interventions utilising rituals and collective strategies like storytelling (e.g. legends, familial stories about coping with the challenges of occupation, Qura'nic stories of how the prophets dealt with trials and tribulations), the creative arts connected to cultural heritage (e.g. dabka [Palestinian dance], embroidery), and faith based rituals may strengthen sumud. Indeed, such rituals build the capacity for emotional self-regulation and social connection (Hobson, Schroeder, Risen, Xygalatas, & Inzlicht, 2018).

More research is needed to explore the ways in which sumud and resistance are conceptualised and expressed to inform local understandings of wellbeing and meaning-making, as well as to further research on coping and resilience in conflict-affected areas.

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