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Beyond a sense of obliviousness: elite education and national identity among Palestinian students in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Through interviews with Palestinian students in elite schools in Israel, we delve into the intersection between experiences of elite identities and national identities. Contrary to the conventional narrative of hegemonic elite education promoting apolitical attitudes, our findings reveal that Palestinian students, belonging to a stigmatized minority group, prioritize academic excellence alongside a strong emphasis on Palestinian patriotism and national identity. Furthermore, we uncover a heightened political awareness among these students, which they attribute to distinct practices and rituals within the school setting. This paper contributes to understanding how elite education intersects with the construction of national identity among minority elites. It offers insights into the experiences of minority elite students facing discrimination while also highlighting the emergence of a self-defined elite within this specific sub-group.

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Introduction

> I still remember the first day I entered the school. The opportunity to study in a school that combines academic excellence and patriotism was a dream that eventually became a tangible reality. Teachers teach us more than just literature, physics or math; they instill in us a deep love of our national heritage and the seeds of humane values and scientific ambition. This school teaches us to acknowledge our national narrative and history, the identity that Israel strives to suppress, and to embrace our Palestinian identity with pride. For my parents and for me the decision to come here was because of what this schools offers: academic excellence and Palestinian patriotism. (Aya, 17 years old)

Aya, a seventeen-year female student studying at an elite Arab school in Israel, emphasized two key aspects of her education: the drive for excellence and a sense of national pride, or what she called 'Palestinian patriotism'. Yet, many researchers of elite education argue that elite schools tend to cultivate apolitical attitudes, blindness towards race and ethnicity and obliviousness to privilege (Horvat and Antonio 1999, Khan and Jerolmack 2013). This is particularly true when describing elite education among hegemonic groups. Yet what happens in elite educational institutions targeting national minority groups? Do these students also exhibit a color-blind approach and/or a sense of

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obliviousness, as described by Khan (2011)? Is a culture of silence (Castagno 2008) also dominant in these schools? These questions guided our research about private education among PCI (Palestinians, citizens of Israel), a national, indigenous minority that experiences stigmatization and ongoing discrimination (Ghanem and Mustafa 2011).

Education in Israel is segregated based on nationality and religious orientation, resulting in separate educational sectors for religious and secular Jewish children, as well as Arab children (Arar, 2012). These sectors include both state and non-state schools. Private schools catering to moderately religious and ultra-orthodox Jewish students, as well as Arab church-affiliated schools, receive partial government funding. Most school children in Israel are enrolled in the state educational system (Agbaria and Pinson 2019). Findings in this article are based on interviews conducted with high school students attending two elite private schools. One is located in an Arab city and the second in a city comprised of both Arabs and Jews (a 'mixed' city); both are in northern Israel. The findings presented here address two primary research questions. Firstly, what are the perceptions and definitions of national identity among Palestinian students enrolled in elite schools? Secondly, how do elite identity and national identity intersect among minority students attending elite schools?

This research builds on previous studies that have examined the relationship between elite education, class, and the reproduction of elite identity (Bourdieu 1986; Demerath 2009; Khan, 2011). However, it examines a unique case study: Arab Palestinians in Israel who are a marginalized national minority facing discrimination and racism while simultaneously undergoing the emergence of their own self-defined elite (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022).

Our findings support existing research and bring forth new insights. Consistent with prior studies, we identified an elite identity (Demerath 2009) and a positive self-perception, accompanied by a sense of entitlement and agency (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Interviewees also expressed a positive orientation towards the future and an ability to aspire (Appadurai 2004). Furthermore, the study confirms the role of schools, as perceived by interviewees, in shaping and fostering elite identity through mechanisms such entrance exams, extracurricular programs, alignment with elite cultural norms, academic orientation initiatives, and discourses of excellence (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). However, this research identified three distinct group-specific characteristics. Firstly, in the school selection process, students seek institutions that emphasize academic excellence and also prioritize engendering a patriotic stance with special emphasis on Palestinian national identity. Secondly, interviewees exhibited a notable degree of political consciousness and acknowledged the contribution of both schools in fostering this awareness through distinctive practices and rituals. This is noteworthy given that it deviates from the widely held understanding of hegemonic elite groups, who often remain oblivious to inequality and consider social hierarchies to be the norm (Khan 2011). Lastly, interviewees expressed profound pride in their national identity, alongside displaying distinct attributes of elite identity, illustrating how these elements mutually reinforce and cultivate each other.

Being a Palestinian in Israel: identity, citizenship and conflict

As reported by the Israeli Central Bureau in 2023, the Palestinian minority in Israel (PCI) constituted roughly 21% of the nation's population. This figure encompasses Palestinians

residing in East Jerusalem, most of them do not hold Israeli citizenship. They are an indigenous native national minority situated between two conflicting realms (Abu-Saad 2008). On one side, they are deeply rooted historically, culturally, and politically in the Arab region, maintaining a Palestinian national identity despite living under Israeli sovereignty. Conversely, they are officially recognized as citizens of Israel, a state self-defined as the homeland of the Jewish people, involved in an ongoing political struggle with Palestinians and the Arab world (Ghanem and Mustafa 2011) (Zreik 2003). claims that the Israeli citizenship was imposed upon the Palestinians who stayed in their homeland following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, rather than being a choice made by them. According to Ghanem and Mustafa (2011) the 1948 war which led to the establishment of the state of Israel, known as the Nakba or catastrophe in Palestinian narrative, marked a sudden eruption from their majority status (constituting about 67% of the population) to becoming a homeland minority. One significant outcome of the 1948 war was the displacement of the Palestinian elite, leading to the disruption of the Palestinian national project (Ghanem 1998). Furthermore, Palestinians who stayed in their homeland were subjected to a military rule until 1966 (Ghanem and Mustafa 2011). claim that the Israeli government and its security branches regarded this minority as an enemy and a strategic threat, leading to the implementation of policies focused on control and suppression on one hand, and cooptation on the other. An outcome of this cooptation policies is the emergence of definitions of PCI as Arab Israelis. This categorization seeks to primarily focus only on cultural traits (belonging to the Arab nation) while excluding political and national identity characteristics (Sa'di 2004). Between 1948 and 1966, the paramount focus of the Palestinian minority was on survival and security, overshadowing concerns about equality or rights, accompanied by fear of persecution and punishment leading to the suppression of their Palestinian identity. A significant shift occurred after the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, which resulted in what Ghanem and Mustafa (2011) term as the 'Palestinization' process. The direct interaction with Palestinians from the occupied territories after the enforced separation due to the 1948 war, coupled with the cessation of military rule in 1966, played a pivotal role in reviving and strengthening the Palestinian component into their identity. This resulted in the increase of national awareness amongst PCI, leading to the establishment of national institutions across political, cultural, and social spheres. In the three decades following the 1967 war, there was a notable improvement in the economic and social standing of the Palestinian community. This progress, involving pursuits of higher education and active participation in the Israeli market (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022), also included efforts to rebuild the community. The accelerated development within the Palestinian community contributed to the emergence of collective rights discourse and a heightened awareness of their citizenship within the state (Zreik 2003).

According to Arar (2012) the situation of PCI is characterized by a continuous identity crisis, as they bear contradictory internal elements within their identity, encompassing Israeli citizenship, Palestinian nationality, Arab ethnicity, and religious ties such as Islam and Christianity. As with Israeli Jews, they hold citizenship yet they also experience multiple forms of discrimination because of their national identity, contributing to educational, social and economic disparities (Okun and Friedlander 2005). Furthermore, policies of control have characterized Israel's approach towards this

minority. Sa'di (2004) identifies two dominant forms of control. The first is repressive and is characterized by extensive surveillance and punishment as evident in actions such as land confiscation and heavy-handed oversight of the educational system. The second is economic dependence whereby educated Arabs are coopted into the state bureaucracy and because the state takes positive measures to enhance Arab Palestinian economic conditions. This strategy divides Arabs in Israel and manipulates them politically in order to achieve compliance and passive cooperation. In recent years there has been a growing body of research that is beginning to characterize Palestinian citizens of Israel as indigenous within a colonial context and a process of creeping apartheid (Sabagh-Khoury 2021; Yiftachel 2023). Yiftachel (2023) employs the term 'coloreds' to refer to PCI who, despite being citizens, have only partial rights, in contrast to Israeli Jews who enjoy full rights. Additionally, Israeli state does not recognize Arab Palestinians as an indigenous national group thus depriving them of collective rights in realms such as allocation of land, cultural recognition, independent control Palestinian education and more (Gani and Jamal 2022). In 2018, the Israeli parliament passed a law with constitutional status which officially designates Israel as the exclusive homeland of the Jewish people. This further solidified the second-class status of Palestinian citizens of Israel (Awayed-Bishara, Hadar, and Tommaso 2022). Despite experiencing upward mobility in the last three decades, their citizenship remains 'hollow', with minimal influence on policies and the nature of the Israeli regime (Jamal 2016). Consequently, they struggle with an intrinsic challenge stemming from their hybrid identity, part Israeli and part Palestinian, unable to fully realize either. This hybrid identity is a primary driver behind the predicament faced by Palestinian citizens of Israel: navigating two incomplete identities amidst a backdrop of enduring national conflict, rendering the task of reconciling their national-Palestinian and civilian-Israeli facets virtually intolerable and complex (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022).

Navigating control and mobility: education for palestinians citizens of Israel

Jewish and Palestinian educational systems in Israel are highly segregated in both practice and administration (Okun and Friedlander 2005). According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, Arab students numbered 545,000 (24% of total students) during the 2016/2017 academic year. The majority attended Arabic language schools, with 90% enrolled in public schools and the remaining 10% in private schools.

Nasser and Abu-Nimer (2022) claim that the formal educational policies of the Israeli government, aimed at controlling and surveilling the Palestinian minority while erasing their national identity, have remained consistent since the establishment of the state. They also emphasize that such measures are not unique or a recent development in Israel; it has demonstrated success in other instances where education was employed to suppress the national identity of indigenous groups, such as the Indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada. These measures of control have led to unequal distribution of government resources, disregard for the Palestinian historical narrative, and marginalization of Arab Palestinian leadership in decisions impacting educational policy (Agbaria 2015).

Agbaria and Pinson (2019) believe that Arab education in Israel vacillates between mobility and control. While the Palestinian community utilizes the education system as

a strategy for empowerment and socio-economic progress, the State of Israel employs various tactics to assert discipline and control. These include extensive surveillance by the Israel internal Security Agency (Shabak), removal of significant references to Palestinian identity from the curriculum, and co-optation of Arab academics to transform them into technocratic and politically disengaged educators. These control-oriented policies deprive Palestinian children of knowledge about their history, narrative, and identity. This is particularly the case in Arab public schools, which are fully supervised and controlled by the centralized Israeli Ministry of Education (Abu-Saad 2008). According to (Abu-Saad 2019), the Arab educational system should be analyzed within the context of colonial policies and colonialism, as the public education system effectively perpetuates the cultural, socioeconomic, and political subordination of Palestinian students. This is achieved through the unequal and discriminatory allocation of resources, programs, and services, along with the imposition of objectives, goals, and curricula that denationalize and more particularly de-Palestinize Palestinian students (Awayed-Bishara, Hadar, and Tommaso 2022).

However, church schools, often referred to as private schools, do not face identical restrictions and supervision. Although they fall under the supervision of the Israeli Ministry of Education and must adhere to official educational policies, including ministry-set goals, curriculum, and matriculation exams, they possess a certain level of autonomy (Agbaria and Obeid Shehadeh 2022). This autonomy enables them to initiate special enrichment programs and have more latitude in selecting their teachers.

Elite education among the Palestinian minority

Arab children have two options for education: attending state public schools or enrolling in private schools. Most private schools are affiliated with churches and identified as 'church schools' or 'private schools' (Agbaria and Obeid Shehadeh 2022). The majority of their funding, about 70%, is provided by the state, while the rest is derived from tuition fees and donations from both within Israel and overseas (Abu-Asbah 2007). Weissbly (2017) identified 62 church schools in 15 Arab towns and mixed cities in Israel, serving a total of 23,417 students, 10% of the Arab student population that year. Nine were in towns with a significant Christian population primarily in Israel's north and six were located in mixed Arab-Jewish cities. Most students enrolled in church elementary schools are Christian; they attend for both academic and religious reasons. However, at the high school level, the percentage of non-Christian students increases as parents seek better educational opportunities for their children (Abu-Asbah 2007). These schools have a reputation for academic excellence; they are consistently some of the best performing in both national and international assessments measuring student academic performance (Agbaria and Obeid Shehadeh 2022). Although not state-owned, these schools must adhere to Ministry of Education requirements, covering pedagogical, administrative, and sanitary standards, among others. While supervised by the Ministry, they follow the official curriculum but retain some autonomy. They commit to teaching core subjects for 75% of the hours, with the remainder at their discretion (Weissbly 2017). They also possess autonomy in hiring educational staff and typically offer enrichment programs and extracurricular activities during and after school hours (Agbaria and

Obeid Shehadeh 2022). Church schools are consistent with the definition of elite schools. They emphasize academic excellence, engage in selective admission practices (including entrance exams) and charge tuition. Elite schools enjoy reputations as prestigious institutions which have a long-standing history of producing successful graduates who go on to achieve notable accomplishments (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009). Church schools provide extra- curriculum programming that exposes students to a rich variety of fields and they highlight cosmopolitan capital (Howard and Maxwell 2021). Khattab (2003) found that Palestinian students attending these elite schools demonstrate greater academic ambition; they are influenced by the social and cultural capital of their families and also by inspiring teachers. Thus, private church schools have emerged as the favored option for Arab Palestinians in Israel, particularly when compared to public schools where performance is subpar, dropout rates are high and there is a lack of adequately qualified teachers (Abu-Asbah 2007).

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 twelfth-grade students from two elite schools in northern Israel. Interviews focused on six main themes including (1) personal and educational backgrounds, (2) personal and collective identity, (3) culture and leisure activities, (4) school experiences and perceptions, (5) future orientation, and (6) the social and political situation in Israel and Arab Palestinian society. They generally lasted 60–90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The research received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the affiliated university of both authors.

Students were recruited with assistance from twelfth-grade coordinators and homeroom teachers. Parental consent was required for participants under the age of 18; five interviewees were 18 and did not require parental consent. Of the 35 students interviewed, 18 were male and 17 were female. Over two-thirds of the students reported having a close family member who either currently attends or has previously attended one of the two schools, usually siblings. Nearly half of the students reported having at least one parent who is an alumnus of one of the schools. All names are pseudonyms.

We examined, categorized, and interpreted the data to identify patterns, themes, and connections in accordance with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Accordingly, we employed open coding where we captured the essence of the data. We then organized the data into themes or categories, an iterative process which facilitated the emergence of new insights and perspectives (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This enabled us to capture the perspectives of our research population.

The research was conducted at two different schools: the first school is located in an Arab town, while the second is in a mixed Arab-Jewish city. Both schools are categorized as private church schools. Students in both schools are of high socioeconomic status (SES)[1] a measurement is based on the education level of the most educated parent, family income and more. Both schools are top-ranked nationally in terms of student eligibility for matriculation certificates in scientific subjects such as biotechnology systems, physics, biology, electronics, and computers. They have highly competitive and exclusive admissions processes which attract students from their respective cities and also from other locales nationally.

Findings

Prior to delving into the three distinct findings derived from our study, we will provide a brief introduction to the distinctive attributes of the two elite schools under examination and highlight relevant research findings from various countries that shed light on students in elite educational institutions. Both schools are consistent with the definition of elite education (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009, Khan 2011) as they emphasize exclusivity, excellence, and superiority. This, in turn, fosters an elite identity among students (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Similarly, they utilize mechanisms to produce elite education, including entrance exams, legacy admission, tuition fees, and extracurricular programs and act as multiple sites of privilege (Koh and Kenway 2016). Interviews with students revealed the diverse range of academic programs and specialized courses they offer. Students reported also participating in international programs and exchange initiatives, contributing to the development of what Howard and Maxwell (2021) define as cosmopolitan identity amongst interviewees. Weenink (2008) describes cosmopolitanism as a distinct orientation towards the world supported by specific skills that includes the ability of understanding and acting that goes beyond local boundaries. It comprises sets of values that assist individuals in navigating and feeling at ease within cosmopolitan circles, viewing cosmopolitanism as a form of capital. He argues that it encompasses two facets: an acknowledgment of global interconnectedness and, secondly, an orientation of open-mindedness towards the Other. Furthermore, students demonstrated a positive self-perception and a strong sense of agency (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). They were very future oriented and demonstrated the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004), which can be described as 'colonizing the future' (Demerath 2009, 34). Students additionally conveyed that the educational staff is highly qualified, expressing pride in the fact that many of their teachers possess master's degrees and some even hold PhDs. This further reinforces their academic excellence and contributes to what Howard and Maxwell (2021) describe as mega elitism.

Interviewees emphasized that gaining admission to the schools is not an open process, underscoring the highly competitive nature of admission to both institutions, accentuating their exclusivity and boundary work (Lamont 1992) and differentiating them from students who don't attend. These factors reinforce students' sense of entitlement and legitimize their privileged status. The deliberate practices employed by the schools nurture an elite identity, instilling in students a culture of excellence, exclusivity, confidence, and ambition (Howard 2010).

As noted, our research focuses on an elite group from within a marginalized national minority, contrasting with typical research in the field. We uncovered three distinctive characteristics unique to this group of elite students. Firstly, school choice serves as an act of resistance, challenging official policies that seek to undermine or eradicate their national identity. Secondly, students want to attend an elite school to pursue academic excellence and as an expression of patriotism. Finally, attending these schools did influence their national identity and self-definition. These characteristics will be further elaborated upon in the three sections below.

School choice as an act of resistance

While focus on academic excellence is relatively universal among elites, we uncovered a distinctive consideration in selection of an elite school: our interviewees also looked for a school that promotes Palestinian patriotism. They sought a supportive environment in which to express their national identity and articulate suppressed Palestinian stories and narratives. When speaking of the school selection process, Layla (17 years old) said: 'At [this] school, there is a particular focus on promoting awareness of our Palestinian national identity, which is personally significant to me'. She also mentioned that 'this focus is less emphasized in schools located in my hometown village' where 'they tend to disregard these matters and may even avoid discussing them altogether'. While academic excellence was the primary consideration, the school's patriotic stance also influenced her and her parent's decision. Nour (17) decided to enroll in her school following an encounter with a student which highlighted her own lack of political and social awareness:

> I began attending the school in 9th grade ... as a result of an accidental meeting with a student from school. I was really impressed by her knowledge of political and social topics, and the way she talked about different issues. I remember I even felt a bit ashamed, because there were many things she talked about that I hadn't heard about before. Joining [this] school was the best decision I have made. I am aware of my identity today and am very proud of my history as Palestinian.

Layla and Nour both highlighted the importance of being proud of their national identity and attributed this to their school. Layan (17), the daughter of a leading figure in the Balad[2] political party, noted that she has been very aware of her Palestinian national identity and narrative from an early age. She mentioned on-going exposure to political issues at home and annual attendance at an 'identity summer camp' organized by the party. Participation in this camp increased her political awareness; she said: 'There wasn't one issue I wasn't exposed to or unfamiliar with regarding our Palestinian history or identity' and enrollment in the school 'was a natural choice' since it is both 'academically excellent and has a high degree of Palestinian patriotism'. Therefore, while some attended the school to learn more about their Palestinian identity, others attended the school because it reinforced and supported knowledge they already had.

Contribution to the Palestinian community was another, similar, motivation for attending a school with a patriotic orientation. Rani (17) enrolled because of his school's reputation as being 'academically one of the best schools in the country and [it is] also known for its significant contribution to the community'. He mentioned that illustrious 'committed Palestinian political figures and community leaders graduated from the school'. Despite other excellent private schools in his city, Rani said:

> I could have chosen to study at one of the other four private schools in the city. However, I chose to attend this school because of its patriotic stance. Unlike other private schools that prioritize academic excellence and do not emphasize issues related to politics or identity, this school teaches us to remember who we are and where we come from. They want us to forget our roots, our identity and here we learn to remember.
>
> Interviewer: Who wants you to forget?
>
> Rani: Israel, the government .... That is why I feel that studying here is a kind of resistance.

In addition to academic excellence which was an important consideration for students, over three fourths of students interviewed mentioned that it was crucial for them to attend a school that promotes Palestinian nationalism and patriotism. Students viewed this as a way to 'voice' their silenced stories and narratives and explore their national identity openly in a safe and supportive environment. The remaining group, less than one fourth, did not prioritize the school's patriotic stance when deciding to enroll, focusing primarily on academic excellence.

Most interviewees said that their parents helped them with the process of enrollment encouraging them to apply, assisting them in preparing for entry exams, transporting them to the school on the exam day, and guiding them regarding entrance requirements. They shared their parent's beliefs that education is a pathway to future academic and professional success and socio-economic mobility. This is particularly important because they belong to a national minority. Therefore, selection of an elite school was a purposeful and deliberate decision, aimed at securing a better future and broader opportunities. These findings reinforce the conclusions of others who identified significant parental involvement in selection of elite schools (Holmes, 2017) among parents of high SES. In his work, Bourdieu (1986) delineates how elites continuously convert and accumulate various forms of capital, including economic, cultural, and social. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction highlights the effective transmission of parental endowments to their offspring and its subsequent impact on their educational attainment. Moreover, educational institutions frequently reflect and amplify the cultural capital of the upper class, whether through curriculum, school culture, or teachers' attitudes towards students (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). These perpetual processes contribute to inequality in education by perpetuating disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and social networks based on one's socio-economic background. While findings concerning parental engagement and guidance in the selection of schools resonate with Bourdieu's cultural theory, interviewees also revealed that their parents considered the school's patriotic stance to be a significant factor, as Layan put it:

> Both my parents encouraged me to enroll in school. Among the four daughters in our family, each of us attended this particular school. My parents always said that it is significant to them that we study not only in a school emphasizing academic excellence but also in one that instills awareness and pride in our national identity.

A similar experience was shared by Majd (17), describing how his father consistently referred to the school as the '*community's lighthouse balancing between academic excellence and patriotic stance*'.

Interviewees' accounts of school reflect a deep commitment to academic excellence intertwined with a strong sense of national identity. The deliberate selection of these schools illustrates a shared aspiration among both parents and their offspring for scholarly achievements but also a deep awareness and pride in Palestinian legacy.

Through students' eyes: school rituals for political empowerment and awareness

Interviewees can be divided into two groups: those who came to school with a high degree of political awareness and those with little or no such awareness prior to enrollment. Those from the first group reported that this awareness was instilled in them by

their families, who emphasized political issues and frequently discussed such topics with their children. Some interviewees from this group also mentioned that one or both of their parents were involved in political parties or activities. The second group of students were primarily exposed to political issues at school. Irrespective of their background, nearly all interviewees spoke highly of their process of developing political awareness and mentioned the crucial role the school played in helping them to build their national identity. Schools promoted this through teacher engagement in political issues during class including a focus on current political and social affairs and extra-curriculum programs such as commemorating historic events, holding Palestinian heritage week and guest lectures by prominent political figures.

Sama (17) shared how she changed following enrollment at her school:

> Before coming to the school, I was not very politically aware, not aware of my national identity. There are many activities and programs here to raise awareness of our national identity, to get to know who we are and where we came from and what our narrative is. This is something that is very emphasized here and I really like it. For example, we have a special day to commemorate Land Day.[3] We have Palestinian Heritage Week, there are lectures and meetings with leading political figures and activists who share their stories with us and provide us with important knowledge regarding different issues such as our rights, our status in the country and our history. This is very important in my opinion.
>
> Interviewer: Why is this important?
>
> Sama: It is important that everyone knows their own narrative and accepts their identity and that they are proud of it and don't deny it. This is something Israel wants us to do: to forget about our history and deny our Palestinian identity. I ask friends from my home village if they talk about political issues or if they commemorate special days like October 2000[4] for example and they don't. They don't know anything about these events and it's very sad. It's like someone is living in the dark.

Bilal (18) expressed a similar view. He came to his school with 'little awareness and knowing bits of information' about his national narrative. He attributed his dis-interest in political issues to living in a mixed city and 'not seeing many things others who live in Arab towns and villages see', and the fact that his parents didn't talk much about politics at home. For Bilal, the process he underwent at school made him 'more mature':

> Today I feel that knowing about my history as Palestinian is very important in building my personality and who I am. Any society that wants to move forward needs to know its history, it is impossible without it, and to be proud of our identity. I feel like I'm mature today compared to other students from other schools.

Both Sama and Bilal used boundary-work (Lamont 1992) in order to differentiate themselves from students who do not attend their schools. They ascribe to themselves the positive qualities of being 'aware' and 'mature'. This distinction between themselves and others reinforces their sense of entitlement and justifies their privileges as elites.

Lina (18) also noted that students in her school, as opposed to those attending both public and private schools in her city, have a high degree of political awareness. She described her fellow students as 'aware and smart' saying they 'can understand complicated matters and have critical thinking'. For her, they are 'mature and take things seriously' and 'care about their community unlike students who study in the other schools'. Although she lives next door to a different private school, she chose this one

because 'here teachers talk to students about things like politics and social topics' and 'don't ignore' things. Lina came to the school with a well-developed political awareness because her grandfather was an internal refugee.[5] He told her stories from an early age which deeply influenced her and helped her to develop a strong identity as a proud Palestinian. She said:

> My grandfather's family was forced to leave their home and lands and they became refugees. My grandfather can see his home from where he lives today but he can't go back to it. This is very painful for him. I came to school already very aware of what happened and of our history, and it's very important to me that my school dedicates time and space discussing these topics to make us aware of our history.

Like Lina, Tarek (17), came to school with a high degree of political awareness. He is 'lucky and proud to study at a school that doesn't ignore his roots and heritage'. Tarek was raised in a very politically engaged family; his father is a mayor and politics has been present in his life since early childhood. He demonstrated in-depth understanding and broad knowledge as he talked about the lack of governmental funding for Arab towns and villages, as well as discriminatory treatment of Palestinians in areas such as land allocation, education, and infrastructure. Tarek respected and appreciated his school's educational staff and their hard work and effort in exposing students to important knowledge as Palestinians. He said:

> The headmaster and the teachers really care about us. They want us to know about our history and they invest a lot in planning activities like Palestinian Heritage Week. They treat us as subjects and not as mere objects; they encourage us to think about things, to express our thoughts. For me this is the best place to be. I feel very confident in expressing myself and talking about myself and my identity. I know this doesn't happen in other schools - teachers are afraid to raise political topics with their students.

The interviewees exemplify the conflict between Palestinians and the state of Israel regarding collective memory and the dynamic relationship between forgetting and remembering. Through various activities and practices, the two schools emphasize Palestinian national identity. They actively construct and build this identity in opposition to the processes of 'silencing' the state seeks to impose within the public educational system (Abu-Saad 2008).

National Identity and Self-definition: 'My identity is how I define myself and not how others define me, I define myself as Palestinian, only, not Israeli'

Palestinians belong to a distinctive, non-assimilated national minority. They hold citizenship in a country which defines itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people and is involved in an ongoing conflict with Palestinians and the Arab world generally (Ghanem and Mustafa 2011). Belonging to a national minority which is in identity conflict with the hegemonic majority affects members' self-perception. In the case of elites from this Palestinian minority, it produces a dual elitist identity (Haidar and Bar-Haim, 2022); that is, an elite group which is also subject to discrimination and marginalization. Indeed, national identification among our interviewees was largely influenced by their desired self-definition and the complex relationship between them and the state.

Almost all the interviewees feel they are 'second-class' citizens and the 'country doesn't really want them'. The majority of interviewees 'don't feel Israeli' and believe that this identity component was forced on them. They also expressed discomfort because the Israeli identity negates their belonging to the Palestinian people. Aya (17) said:

> I don't identify myself as Israeli, only Palestinian. For me it is only a formality, to be able to cross borders and travel. If I could, I would rather not have it, since it doesn't represent me and means nothing to me. I have the Israeli nationality since I was born in a place called Israel, and not for good reasons. For me, you are either Israeli or Palestinian, you can't be both.

Fadi (17) made a similar comment:

> I don't identify myself as Israeli. I can't be proud of this identity since I am Palestinian. To be Israeli is to deny my Palestinian identity. I don't feel that I belong to the country at all, they don't want us here.

Most interviewees spoke about feeling unwanted and experiencing a 'discriminatory attitude' from the Jewish majority and the state. This, in turn reinforces the Palestinian component of their identity. Sheren (17) demonstrated this well by saying:

> I don't identify as Israeli, only as Arab Palestinian. It is true that I have an Israeli passport and citizenship, but it is only on paper. I don't get rights equal to Jews, I am discriminated against, so I don't see how it can be possible to say that I am Israeli. My identity is how I define myself and not how others define me.

Deema (17) pointed out that citizenship is something you 'feel and experience and not something written on a piece of paper'. She spoke about feeling alienated from the country and what it represents saying:

> Nothing in being Israeli represents me as Palestinian. The mainstream Israeli culture isn't for me. Everything in the country is directed towards one group only: the Jewish. I know some identify as Arab Israelis but personally I can't.

When asked about what she thinks about individuals who identify as Arab Israelis, Deema answered:

> Personally, I don't feel I belong, I only feel belonging to my Palestinian identity. I have no problem with Israel as a country but I do have problem with those who want to erase me or my people, and I have a problem with Arabs who deny their identity to please Israelis.

Nour (17) was less accepting of those who define themselves as Arab Israelis saying: 'I can't befriend people who identify as Israelis because it reflects lack of awareness and being detached from reality'.

While 29 students identified as Palestinian, six students identified as Arab Israelis. Three out of the six students acknowledged the Palestinian component in their identity but referred to it as being 'less dominant'. Sari (17), expressed this view:

> I identify as Arab Israeli. I was born here, this is the only country I know. I have an Israeli passport. I prefer not to discuss politics. I don't deny my Palestinian origins, but I prefer not to look at the past all the time.

The remaining three students chose to identify themselves as 'only human beings'. Rasha (17) said: 'I identify myself as a human being. I don't care about labels, I am against labels.

People try all the time to put on us labels like Palestinian, Israeli and I refuse to play this game'. Kareem (17), made a similar argument saying: 'I feel I don't belong to any identity, I belong to humanity, that's enough in my opinion'.

The tension expressed by the interviewees regarding their national identity as Palestinians and their Israeli citizenship is unique in comparison with narratives generally expressed by global elites (Khan 2011). While elites typically feel comfortable in the world and often display apolitical attitudes, the majority of this particular group exhibits a strong political consciousness. Belonging to a national minority group which is in identity conflict with the hegemonic majority group affects members' self-perception and produces a dual elitist identity (Haidar and Bar-Haim, 2022).

Discussion

Our research supports existing findings while offering new insights into educational elitism among national minority groups. Consistent with previous studies, interviewees demonstrated elite identity (Demerath 2009), a positive self-perception, a sense of entitlement, and agency (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009), as well as positive future aspirations (Appadurai 2004). However, we provide new insights into educational elitism which offer a deeper understanding of how elitism intersects with the formation of national identity within marginalized minority communities.

Our research population diverges from other elite groups in part due to their much more politicized orientation. We found that students, frequently motivated by their parents as well, select elite schools based on academic excellence while also taking into account political considerations. Specifically, they sought schools which emphasize Palestinian patriotism and the development of a Palestinian national identity. Interviewees also demonstrated a high level of political consciousness. They highlighted the schools' political stance and the distinctive programs and activities fostered by the schools that contributed to raising their awareness. This deviates from the common perception of hegemonic elite groups who often remain oblivious to inequality and consider social hierarchies as normative (Khan 2011). Lastly, interviewees expressed profound pride in their national identity along with pursuit of academic excellence within a deeply discriminatory reality. This contrasts with the more convenient option often selected by non-hegemonic elites who try to assimilate into a 'raceless' identity (Wright 2009). Thus, this research highlights interviewee resilience and refusal to relinquish their distinct cultural and national heritage.

Moreover, the selection of schools revealed another noteworthy aspect, as emphasized by the interviewees, often revolving around the prioritization of national identity alongside academic excellence. For many, this choice served as a form of resistance against the state's policies targeting the Palestinian minority. Indeed, a significant majority of students identified themselves as proud Palestinians, underscoring the pivotal role of their national identity in their lives. This aspect of their identity serves not only as a source of pride but also as a means of asserting their existence and resisting attempts at assimilation. It appears that this act of resistance serves as an important component in shaping their elite identity as well as reinforcing their national identity. The symbiotic relationship between these identities becomes apparent, with each strengthening the other. This suggests that the cultivation of their

elite identity is intricately linked to their commitment to preserving and asserting their national identity. Thus, their defiance against assimilation and to de-Palestinize (Awayed-Bishara, Hadar, and Tommaso 2022) them, not only reaffirms their sense of cultural belonging but also reinforces their elite identity. Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theory of cultural capital can provide valuable insight into understanding the dynamics at play in this context. In Bourdieu's framework, cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and cultural resources that individuals possess and which can be used to gain social advantage. In the case of the Palestinian minority students, their choice of elite schools not only signifies a pursuit of academic excellence but also serves as a means of asserting their cultural and national identity. By attending these schools, they are able to access a form of cultural capital that is aligned with their heritage and values. This strategic consumption of cultural capital allows them to navigate and resist dominant societal norms that seek to marginalize their identity. Furthermore, interviewees' rejection of assimilation and their steadfast commitment to their cultural heritage and national belonging can be understood as a manifestation of their habitus- the ingrained dispositions and attitudes shaped by one's social context- within the educational field.

The process of identity formation for individuals who belong to a stigmatized national minority group and also possess an elite identity is complex. Most interviewees identify themselves as 'Palestinians' or 'Arab Palestinians', yet some opted for the label 'Palestinian citizens of Israel' and others identified as 'Palestinians living in Israel but not Israelis'. A smaller number of students deemphasized their Palestinian national identity instead choosing to identify as Arab Israelis. Most students said their Palestinian identity was important, thus highlighting their connection to broader Palestinian national identity. This underscores political factors including issues of status, oppressive measures employed by the state against this national indigenous minority and collective rights. This is in comparison with an identification as Arab Israeli, an identity which is based primarily on cultural characteristics and individual rights (Sa'di 2004). Students who identify as Palestinian shape and cultivate their national identity and demonstrate a sense of personal pride. Thus, contrary to elites from hegemonic groups that often adopt an approach which is apolitical and color-blind and may exhibit obliviousness (Castagno 2008, Khan 2016), interviewees in our research provide a contrasting narrative. They demonstrate deep awareness of the political dimensions of their identity and the broader social structures that shape their experiences. In contrast to the color-blind approach often favored by hegemonic elites, these interviewees actively engage with issues of ethnicity and national identity, recognizing the importance of acknowledging and addressing systemic injustices.

Additionally, interviewees noted the schools' proactive approach to fostering and empowering students' national identity. Accordingly, students are committed to their national identity, take pride in it and exhibit positive affections and an empowered self. This contrasts with the majority of Arab public schools which operate under the supervision and control of the Ministry of Education. They tend to avoid political matters because they are worried about potential political consequences (Agbaria and Pinson 2019). Generally, Israeli teachers are reluctant to address controversial topics; rather they avoid, depoliticize, or completely disregard such topics (Kagan, Pinson, and Schler 2022). Most Christian private schools tend

to prioritize academic excellence and adopt an apolitical stance consistent with the state's educational policies towards the Palestinian community (Levy and Massalha 2012).

However, from the students' perspective, it's worth noting that the two schools under study are not only academically outstanding but have also succeeded in fostering political engagement among their students. According to students both schools effectively prioritize identity issues in the existing curriculum and through extracurricular activities such as guest lecturers, celebrating special national days, and having teachers engage in dialogue with their students. Thus, they successfully manage to incorporate political issues within their educational mandate.

This educational approach has been termed 'affective nationalism' (Zembylas 2013). Affective nationalism recognizes and explores student and educator emotions which emerge through diverse practices, rituals, objects, and materially varied arrangements associated with the nation. This encompasses a wide range of events and experiences, including ceremonies that collectively commemorate significant days in the nation's history, as well as everyday activities such as informal conversations between teachers or students. Such experiences can evoke a range of emotions and sentiments including pride, affection, shame, or anger. Zembylas (2013) argues that the emotional dimension profoundly influences national identity development and a sense of belonging among students.

We believe that affective nationalism also contributes to constructing the elite Palestinian national identity expressed by students in this study. Because they belong to a marginalized and stigmatized national minority, they are subjected to identity deconstruction by the Israeli educational system (Abu-Saad and Champagne 2006). Students often face discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural assimilation. Yet, students interviewed here employ affective nationalism as a means of resistance allowing them to reclaim their heritage, assert their cultural distinctiveness, and advance their rights. It powerfully shapes their collective identity and fosters a sense of belonging and pride. By cultivating a deep emotional attachment to their national identity, these elite students not only navigate the complexities of their dual identities (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022) but also develop a strong sense of solidarity with their minority group. Affective nationalism acts as a source of strength, inspiring them to challenge systemic inequalities and work towards social and political change and practicing their agency as elites.

The limitations of our study, which relied solely on interviews with students, should be acknowledged. However, future research papers could incorporate ethnographic research methods alongside documentation analysis of schools and observations within the educational environment to gain deeper insights into how institutions establish and perpetuate elite and national identities, as elucidated by the perspectives of the students in this study. Additionally, adopting Bourdieu's framework, it would be valuable to explore how students who identify with elite social statuses and possess strong national political identities navigate the conversion of cultural and symbolic capital. For instance, future studies could examine their daily interactions and experiences when employed in organizations with a predominant Jewish co-workers or while attending universities where Palestinian identity may face stigmatization, shedding light on the nuanced processes of capital conversion in real-life contexts shaped by social, cultural, and political dynamics. This holistic approach, blending ethnographic insights with

theoretical frameworks, promises a comprehensive understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying identity formation and capital conversion.

Notes

1. Based on information from the Israeli ministry of education website.
2. Balad is a political party that aims to transform Israel into a democracy for all citizens, regardless of their national or ethnic identity. They reject the idea of Israel as a Jewish state and seek to establish a new democratic and secular state. Additionally, Balad advocates for the recognition of Palestinians citizens of Israel as a national minority, with autonomy in areas such as education, culture, and media.
3. Land Day is a yearly event held on March 30th to commemorate the first major political protest by Palestinian citizens of Israel. It occurred in 1976 when Israel seized about 1,500 acres of land from Palestinian villages in the Galilee region for establishment of military bases and settlements. In response, Palestinians organized a General Strike and marches. The demonstrations resulted in violent clashes and led to the deaths of six unarmed Palestinians. Hundreds more were arrested and wounded.
4. After the Second Intifada began on September 28th, 2000, Palestinian citizens of Israel protested in several villages and cities demonstrating support for Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip while also protesting against inequality and neglect within Israel. Israeli police used rubber bullets, snipers, and live ammunition in many of the demonstrations, resulting in the deaths of 12 Palestinian citizens of Israel.
5. The term 'Palestinian internal refugee' refers to Palestinians who were displaced from their homes at 1948 and became refugees, but remained within the borders of historical Palestine which later became Israel.

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