



Youssef Hasweh

YUANJIAN LIU

The Fight for Peace

U.S. college students experience trauma, seek resolution in the wake of Israel-Hamas conflict

By Sheree R. Curry

IT IS MORE THAN 6,100 miles from Chicago to the Gaza Strip, yet the war between Israel and Hamas took an emotional toll on college students at the University of Chicago, just as it had at other institutions of higher education across the country.

"It has been a wild ride." That's how Palestinian American Youssef Hasweh sums up his senior year at the prestigious university in the Windy City. He was one of four students pepper sprayed and arrested by campus police in the fall amid pro-Palestinian rallies. Then at the spring commencement, the first-generation college student was not conferred a degree because of the manner of his continued activism, including being involved in what university officials said was an unauthorized encampment on the quad.

WAR TRAUMA AND DRAMA

"The mere level of punishment is so significant for what happened," says Hasweh, who has cousins living in the West Bank and empathy for the tens of thousands displaced and dying in Gaza. "I was having a really hard time post-Oct. 7 in terms of the (Israeli government) retaliation and worried about my family's safety. It was really hard to get out of bed and go to class and act like everything was OK."

He says the university, which prides itself on freedom of expression, should have been more understanding of the roller coaster of emotions.

Enzi Tanner, a licensed social worker, agrees that officials at institutions of higher education need to have an understanding of how traumatic events affect subsets of students differently. He says many American college students, especially Muslims and Jews, experienced trauma as a result of the



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PROVIDED BY ENZI TANNER; PROVIDED BY TIM MELLMAN; LISA MILLER; MARK BROWN/UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

war between Israel and Hamas, and that was then exacerbated by how they felt they were treated on campus. "People's traumas and reactions to it are very valid," Tanner says.

Tim Mellman, a rising junior studying political science at Washington University in St. Louis, where some demonstrators were arrested, says he has Muslim, Jewish and Christian friends on campus.

"We have decided we are not going to talk about (the Israel-Hamas war) so we can maintain that friendship," he says. Mellman spent this summer in Washington, D.C., as an intern for the lobbying organization American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), but on campus he says he was mostly a bystander.

Eliza Ross and Joshua Weisskopf, two Jewish students who graduated in June from the University of Chicago, were active in pro-Israel demonstrations

on campus.

"Antisemitism emerged very quickly and intensely on our campus after Oct. 7," Ross says. "The response of the administration was fairly passive, particularly with regards to Jewish student concerns about the suppression of our speech."

As a leader of the Chabad student board and the Maroons for Israel student group, Ross organized a fall rally and built a coalition of about a dozen Jewish student organizations supporting Israel's right to defend itself after Hamas-led militants murdered some 1,200 people and abducted about 250 hostages.

Weisskopf, who spoke at the rally, says he didn't feel protected by the university given that organizers had gone through the proper channels to reserve space on the quad, and others came and shouted over them. "Most of my speech was drowned out by their

bullhorns and their chants," he says. "It really distracted from what we were trying to do there."

Shir Alon, an assistant professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota, says, "The source of much of the unease felt by Jewish students is that when they encounter this critique, they understand it as a form of illegitimate attack on their identity and collective belonging. Our role as activists, educators or public speakers is to emphasize that critique of Israel must not be conflated with antisemitism, which is hatred of or discrimination against Jews as Jews."

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Alon, who is an Israeli Jew, believes some universities may have overreacted by expelling students or by withholding degrees from students "who, according to their professors, have graduated and fulfilled all their requirements."

Shahezard Ahmadi, an associate professor of history at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., says unlike the Russia-Ukraine war, where there is massive destruction in Ukraine, "So many people who are not connected to Palestine, not connected to Israel, are really invested and become very charged about the conflict in the Holy Land."

Ahmadi, who is Muslim and of Iranian descent, adds, "Institutions seem really flustered by this."

As students return in the fall, her advice to universities is to "Get people in a room talking to each other. If the institution adopts a real intentional strategy to make sure that the programming is focused on humanizing, that to me is success."

As for Mellman, he remains optimistic and hopes there can be peace in the Middle East. In the meantime, "I look forward to seeing all of my friends in the fall."