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BRIEF REPORT

Spontaneous Contact and Intergroup Attitudes in Asymmetric Protracted Ethno-National Conflict: East Jerusalem Palestinian Students in an Israeli Academic Setting

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In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of East Jerusalem Palestinian students studying at Israeli higher education institutions in Israel and in preacademic preparatory programs. This study examines how spontaneous encounters with Jewish students while attending an Israeli academic institution are associated with young East Jerusalem Palestinian students' attitudes toward the integration of East Jerusalem Palestinians into the city of Jerusalem and cooperation with Israeli Jews. We analyze the responses to an online survey of 106 East Jerusalem Palestinian students attending a 1-year preparatory program at an Israeli academic institute. We find that Palestinian students who report spontaneous contact with Jewish students on campus during the year express more favorable attitudes toward the integration of East Jerusalem Palestinians into the city of Jerusalem and more positive attitudes toward Jewish Israelis in general.

Public Significance Statement

This study indicates that spontaneous contact between individuals from different ethnic and religious groups in academic settings is associated with favorable attitudes toward intergroup contact, even in the context of protracted ethnopolitical conflict.

Keywords: intergroup contact, spontaneous contact, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, East Jerusalem


Recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of predominantly Hebrew-speaking young East Jerusalem men and women who study in Israeli higher education institutions (Ramon, 2021). The aim of this study is to examine how studying in an Israeli academic setting and interacting with Jewish society are associated

with young East Jerusalem Palestinian students' attitudes toward the integration of East Jerusalem Palestinians into the city of Jerusalem and cooperation with Israeli Jews.

The study focuses on a preacademic program offered at an Israeli academic institute to young Palestinians from East Jerusalem, aged 18–20, who are graduates of the Palestinian education system. The program is conducted on the university campus, and the classrooms are spread across several buildings. Therefore, although the classes are homogenous, the study environments are heterogeneous, and there are opportunities to meet other students in general and Jewish students in particular in corridors, cafeterias, libraries, and other open spaces. Approximately, 350 students attend the program each year. The program provides preparatory courses, including a Hebrew language course aimed at helping students transition to education in Israeli higher education institutions. East Jerusalem Palestinian students at Israeli campuses and preparatory programs face unique challenges, as they are largely unfamiliar with Israeli society. In many cases, their university experience is their first direct interaction with Israeli society.

Whereas previous studies in the field that have examined intergroup contact between Israeli Jews and Palestinians in higher education institutions have focused on organized and structured contact, such as joint study teams or intergroup dialogues conducted within the academic framework (Dessel & Ali, 2012; Kapshuk & Shapira, 2022; Zigenlaub & Sagy, 2020), the present study focuses on spontaneous intergroup

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contact, which is not an organized and/or a professionally moderated encounter between Jews and Palestinians. Thus, we use the term “spontaneous contact” to distinguish this type of contact from other types of structured and organized intergroup contacts.

Contact Between Groups in Higher Education

The literature suggests that positive interactions between individuals from different groups can enhance intergroup relations by reducing prejudice (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Ron & Maoz, 2013). Evidence shows that positive contact between conflicting groups in mixed spaces within cities can result in more favorable attitudes toward the other group. For instance, Weiss (2021) found that Jewish patients who received brief treatment from a Palestinian doctor developed a more positive attitude toward Palestinians in general.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that mixed educational settings, where students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds learn together, can promote positive intergroup attitudes and perceptions of other groups (Ashliha et al., 2020; Ross, 2014; Sidanius et al., 2008). A study on East Jerusalem students studying on an Israeli campus found that these students perceived the campus as a secure environment, particularly during periods of political and security uncertainty, as opposed to their neighborhoods in East Jerusalem (Halabi, 2022, p. 8). These students also considered the campus a safe space to interact with Jewish people (Halabi, 2022).

Hypotheses

Based on the discussion and the studies mentioned above, we hypothesize the following:

1. The extent of spontaneous contact of East Jerusalem Palestinian students with Jewish students during their studies in a preparatory program is associated with East Jerusalem Palestinian students' favorable attitudes toward the integration of East Jerusalem Palestinians into Jerusalem.
2. The extent of spontaneous contact of East Jerusalem Palestinian students with Jewish students during their studies in a preparatory program is associated with East Jerusalem Palestinian students' favorable attitudes toward working together with Jewish students on projects promoting coexistence, dialog, and joint learning.

Method

Survey Design and Participants

We gathered our data by conducting an online survey on June 20, 2021, which was toward the end of the academic year in the program. A total of 108 East Jerusalem Palestinian students aged 18–20 (69% female) participated in the survey, which focused on their experiences in the academic institute during the academic year. Although the survey was conducted in Arabic, we included English translations of the items here.

Measures

Spontaneous Contact

This is the independent variable, which examined the degree of spontaneous contact (i.e., direct conversation) between the

respondents and Jewish students during their studies in the program. The respondents rated the extent of their spontaneous contact with Jewish students using a 5-point scale.¹

Perceptions of Integration Into the City of Jerusalem

This is the first dependent variable, which assessed the respondents' perceptions of the integration of Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem into the city of Jerusalem using a 5-point scale.²

Motivation for Cooperation With Jewish Students

This is the second dependent variable, which was created based on the average of three items that assessed the respondents' willingness to cooperate with Jewish students. The respondents rated their motivation to cooperate with Jewish students on a 5-point scale in three frameworks: (a) joint projects for coexistence, (b) dialog groups, and (c) joint learning with Jewish students.³ The internal reliability of the items ($\alpha = 0.857$) was considered sufficient in the social sciences.

Control Variables

The models also accounted for several control variables that may affect perceptions of Palestinian integration and the proclivity to cooperate with Jewish students: (a) having Jewish friends (5-point scale),⁴ (b) previous participation in a dialog group (yes or no), and (c) exposure to Jews in the workplace (5-point scale).⁵ We also controlled for the respondents' (a) degree of religiosity (4-point scale)⁶ and (b) gender (male = 0, female = 1).

Results

To analyze the data, we used linear regression to predict the impact of our independent variable, spontaneous contact, on each of the dependent variables: perceptions of integration into the city of Jerusalem, and motivation for cooperation with Jews (Models 1 and 3). In the second stage, we added control variables (Jewish friends, previous participation in Jewish–Palestinian dialog groups, contact with Jews in the workplace, religiosity, and gender) to the regression Models (2 and 4) to determine whether the correlation between spontaneous contact and the dependent variables persisted when alternative explanations were included in

¹ The respondents were asked, “How many times, if at all, during your studies at the University in the last year, did you speak (directly) with a Jewish student?”

² The measure was worded as follows: “I think that the integration of residents of East Jerusalem into the city of Jerusalem is desirable and positive.”

³ The first item was worded as follows: “I would be interested in working in cooperation with Jewish students on projects regarding the coexistence between Jews and Arabs.” The second item was worded as follows: “I would be interested in working in cooperation with Jewish students in a dialog group.” The third item was worded as follows: “I would be interested in working in cooperation with Jewish students to carry out a joint educational assignment and/or in performing an assignment in a group that includes Jewish students.”

⁴ The respondents were asked, “Do you have any Jewish friends?”

⁵ The respondents were asked, “Do you have any contact with Jews in your workplace?”

⁶ The measure was formulated as follows: “Please indicate your level of religiosity.”

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Linear Regression Models

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Perceptions of integration into Jerusalem	3.349	1.187				
2. Motivation to cooperate	3.286	1.005				
3. Spontaneous contact	2.433	1.234	0.243***	0.374***	0.234***	0.255***
4. Jewish friends	1.424	0.729		-0.0378		0.261**
5. Dialog group	1.622	0.970		-0.077		-0.075
6. Workplace contact	2.056	1.102		0.001		0.000
7. Religiosity	2.377	0.653		-0.464***		-0.396***
8. Gender	0.688	0.465		0.014		0.085

Note. $N = 106$. Model 1 shows the correlation between spontaneous contact (independent variable) and integration into Jerusalem (Model 1) and motivation for further interaction with Jews (Model 3). Models 2 and 4 repeat the analysis in Models 1 and 3, respectively, controlling for Jewish friends, previous participation in Jewish–Palestinian dialog groups, contact with Jews in the workplace, religiosity, and gender.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

the models. The means, standard deviations, and regression models are presented in Table 1.

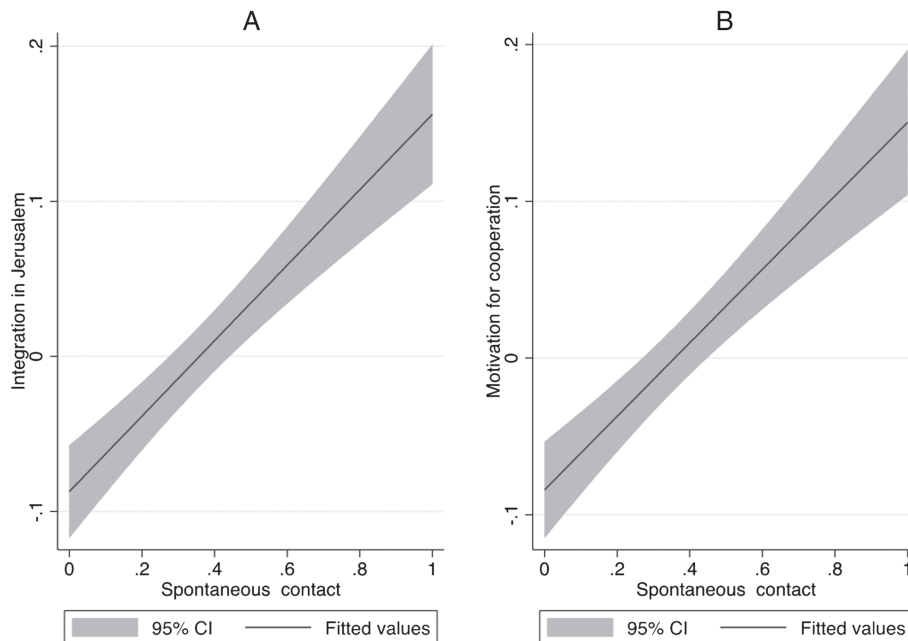
Model 1 indicates a positive and significant correlation between spontaneous contact and favorable perceptions of integration of East Jerusalem residents into the city of Jerusalem ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < .001$). The regression analysis shows that spontaneous contact accounted for 0.06% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.06$) in perceptions of integration. The correlation between spontaneous contact and the dependent variable is statistically significant, with a p value of less than 0.001 and an F -statistic of 7.11, $F(1, 104) = 7.11$, $p < .001$.

Similar results were retrieved in Model 2 ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < .001$) even after adding control variables to the model, such as Jewish

friends ($\beta = -0.378$), previous participation in Jewish–Palestinian dialog groups ($\beta = -0.077$), contact with Jews in the workplace ($\beta = 0.001$), religiosity ($\beta = -0.464$, $p < .001$), and gender ($\beta = 0.014$). The regression analysis shows that spontaneous contact explained 17.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.17$) in perceptions of integration. The correlation between spontaneous contact and the dependent variable was statistically significant, with a p value of less than .001 and an F -statistic of 3.58, $F(6, 99) = 3.58$, $p < .001$, refer to Figure 1A).

Model 3 also shows a positive and significant correlation between spontaneous contact and motivation to work in cooperation with Jews ($\beta = 0.234$, $p < .001$). The regression analysis indicates that spontaneous contact accounted for 0.08% of the

Figure 1
The Predicted Value of the Dependent Variables



Note. The line in the graph shows the predicted value of the dependent variables—favorable perceptions of integration into Jerusalem (A, Model 2) and motivation to cooperate with Jewish students (B, Model 4), when increasing the independent variable of spontaneous contact by 1, controlling for Jewish friends, previous participation in a dialog group between Jews and Palestinians, contact with Jews in the workplace, and the level of religiosity and gender. CI = confidence interval.

variance ($R^2 = 0.08$) in the dependent variable. This correlation was also statistically significant, with a p value of less than .001 and an F -statistic of 5.55, $F(1, 104) = 9.39$, $p < .001$.

Similar results were obtained in model 4 ($\beta = 0.255$, $p < .001$) even when controlling for the variables of having Jewish friends ($\beta = 0.261$, $p < .005$), previous participation in Jewish–Palestinian dialog groups ($\beta = -0.075$), contact with Jews in the workplace ($\beta = 0.000$), religiosity ($\beta = -0.396$, $p < .001$), and gender ($\beta = 0.085$). The regression analysis shows that spontaneous contact explained 25.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.25$) in the dependent variable. This correlation was also statistically significant, with a p value of less than .001 and an F -statistic of 5.55, $F(6, 99) = 5.55$, $p < .001$, refer to Figure 1B).

Discussion

In line with our expectations, the results show that the spontaneous contact of East Jerusalem Palestinian students with Jewish students during their studies in Israeli academic campus in Jerusalem was associated with East Jerusalem Palestinian students' favorable attitudes toward the integration of East Jerusalem Palestinians into the city of Jerusalem and cooperation with Israeli Jews.

Our research contributes to the literature on intergroup contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011) and to the literature that focuses on contact between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (Rabadi et al., 2023; Ron & Maoz, 2013; Weiss, 2021). Our study provides evidence that even in the context of protracted ethno-political conflict, spontaneous contact between individuals from different ethnic and religious groups in academic settings can result in positive perceptions of other identity groups.

Some previous studies have reported Palestinian students' negative experiences in Israeli higher education institutions (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014; Rabadi et al., 2023; Sagy, 2002). However, it is important to note that these were small-scale qualitative studies with limited generalizability. Future research should use multiple methodologies to identify the conditions under which contact is associated with more favorable attitudes in mixed academic settings.

Given the limitations of the sample we used in our study, follow-up research should examine the impact of spontaneous contact on intergroup attitudes using a larger sample. It should also investigate the effect of spontaneous contact on intergroup attitudes in different mixed spaces in heterogeneous cities.

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