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Why Protest When it Is Not Working? The Complexities of Efficacy in the Current Palestine Solidarity Protests

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We write this piece while witnessing the human rights violations against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the violence created by the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. We recognize and share the horror and despair that many have felt as observers of this enormous, preventable suffering. At the same time, we have witnessed massive solidarity protests worldwide in the last few months. Disappointingly, we have also seen repression and the refusal of several governments (above all the United States) to follow the widely-supported demands for a ceasefire. In light of this duality of continued collective action despite despair (see Bird et al., 2024) and lack of apparent wins, our aim is to address how we understand efficacy in protest, both in the immediate and in the long term.
We are a group of social psychologists with scholarly and personal connections to what we are witnessing. Many of us work on collective action and social movements. Some of us have experienced the direct or transgenerational impact of war, genocide, human rights violations, political repression and persecution, and displacement. One of us is Palestinian, one of us is Lebanese, and another of us is Jewish. All of us are writing from a shared position of solidarity with Palestine.

**Collective Action in Solidarity with Palestine - and its Repression**

At the time of writing, it has been nearly 150 days since Israel began its heightened attacks on Gaza, and solidarity events and protests calling for immediate ceasefire have carried on globally in over 100 countries (Al Jazeera, 2024). The ACLED (Lay & Murillo, 2023) reports that approximately 4200 protest events were held during the first three weeks of attacks on Gaza. The demonstrations have ranged from student-led rallies on university campuses to public gatherings in town squares organised by unions and charity groups and large-scale marches down major streets of capital cities, some with hundreds of thousands of participants. The public rallies have been attended by people of all backgrounds and age groups. Some hold homemade placards calling for a ceasefire. Others address their respective governments, calling out complicit politicians. Still others quote Palestinian poets – among them those who have been killed during this round of Israeli onslaught such as Refaat Alareer.

However, these acts of solidarity often have been met with repression, at times quite explicit and severe. In Amman, Jordan, hundreds of protesters were arrested between October and November 2023 (Amnesty International, 2024). In Germany, protests in support of Palestine were banned (Amnesty International, 2023). Similar enforcements are in place in other nation-
states as well, including banning phrases calling for freedom and equality such as “From the River to the Sea” (Deutsche Welle, 2023).

Even university campuses, supposed bastions of free speech, have become places of repression. Columbia University’s administration recently banned the chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace for the remainder of the semester (Marantz, 2023). The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology fired the renowned anthropologist Professor Ghassan Hage for his social media posts criticising Israel’s attacks on Gaza (BRISMES, 2024). The distinguished Professor Avi Shlaim, known for his criticism of Zionism, was disinvited from giving a lecture at Liverpool Hope University (Williams, 2023).

These are instances that have been widely shared and known but many other academics worldwide have suffered censorship due to their pro-Palestinian stance. In many cases, restrictions on expressing solidarity with Palestinians have been presided over by the higher echelons of institutional bodies. In Autumn 2023, Michelle Donelan, the UK Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology notified UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) of two academics – members of UKRI’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) advisory board – and accused them of holding ‘extremist views’ on current events in Gaza and Israel. She further demanded that UKRI take action and cut links with these academics, based on what they had expressed on their social media accounts. In response, UKRI suspended the EDI advisory board, a move strongly criticised by the University and College Union in the UK, of which these two academics are members (see Grady, 2023; Leyser, 2023).

**Collective Efficacy of Protests**

Despite these attempts of repression, protests in solidarity with Palestine have drawn large crowds across the globe - for example, half a million participants in London (Middle East
Eye, 2024) and over 300,000 in Washington D.C. (Mondoweiss, 2023). Yet, as recently as February 20th, the US continued to veto support for a ceasefire and the UK abstained from vote (Reuters, 2024). After months of large-scale protests, this may give the impression that the protests are not effective, and could lead us to be cynical about their purpose. The traditional view and extensive research linking efficacy, or perceived effectiveness of action, to individuals’ engagement in collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008) seems insufficient to explain the sustained and growing number and scale of protests in solidarity with Palestine. Why do people continue to protest while their actions have been largely unsuccessful in effecting changes in key stakeholders’ positions on Gaza?

We argue that protests have several immediate positive effects on protesters and observers, as well as long-term effects on the movement and society. This suggests a broadening of how we understand efficacy in general and in repressive contexts specifically, as well as the impact and importance of solidarity protests. Some theorising and empirical research have challenged the link between efficacy and collective action (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2006). Two particular challenges can shed light on why solidarity protests continue without clearly tangible, short-term positive outcomes on the political level. The first challenge comes from a more pluralistic understanding of efficacy (Hornsey et al., 2006). Rather than focusing narrowly on whether the action will influence decision-makers directly and change political outcomes (political efficacy, Saab et al., 2014), efficacy can take on different forms and goals, such as attracting public attention (Saab et al., 2014; Li et al., 2023) and building oppositional movements (Hornsey et al., 2006). In addition, people join protests or resist in other ways to achieve symbolic goals such as expressing personal and collective values (Hornsey et al., 2006),
or preserving dignity and honour (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2024) in the absence of immediate, tangible political gains.

The second challenge to a linear understanding of the efficacy-action link comes from research in highly repressive political contexts. This research suggests that the importance of efficacy for collective action, especially in influencing key decision-makers, diminishes in contexts of political repression (Ayanian et al., 2021). Specifically, perceived efficacy becomes less relevant in people’s decision to participate in protests as repression increases and hope for political change dwindles (see also Adra & Li, 2024). Meanwhile, other factors such as a politicised identity, moral outrage, and perceived injustices gain prominence in motivating individuals to protest (see Ayanian et al., 2024, for a review). Indeed, recent social psychological theorising on collective action generally underscores the importance of moral motivations as underlying people's engagement in activities challenging the status quo (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2022; van Zomeren et al., 2018). Principles of justice and fairness play a key role in bringing people together to fight for a cause, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Even when political efficacy is limited, other forms of efficacy as well as values and morality can drive peoples’ sustained participation in protests.

**Empowerment and Emotion in Protests - Individual Benefits of Protesting**

While belief in the efficacy of an individual protest may not be the strongest driver of participation in it, engaging in activism impacts more broadly the belief that collective action can create change in the world. This sense of empowerment, defined as “that positive social-psychological transformation related to a sense of being able to (re)shape the social world that takes place for members of subordinate groups who overturn (or at least challenge) existing
relations of dominance” (Drury & Reicher, 2009, p. 708), can endure after participation in protest and go on to motivate future participation. Challenging power structures can take many forms; it is not just street protests that can be empowering (Acar & Uluğ, 2016). Being part of a crowd, and having the opportunity to be with like-minded others and speak truth to power can imbue participants with a sense of hope and the possibility that change may come in the future (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Additionally, seeing others take action can create a sense of hope (Ojala, 2023) as well as empower vicariously (Drury et al., 2022).

There is also substantial research on how these and other emotions—feelings of anger, frustration, or even hope—may encourage people to attend protest events (Ayanian et al., 2021; Tausch et al., 2011). In addition to motivating participation, collective action provides an emotional outlet that participants may not otherwise be able to experience (Becker et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2009). Thus, there are many personal benefits of collective action. For example, people engaged in activism have been shown to increase their general wellbeing through taking action with others (Vestergren et al., 2018, 2019).

However, it should be noted that there are also potentially detrimental effects of participation. In addition to potentially being arrested or abused during protests (Ayanian & Tausch, 2016; Ayanian et al., 2021), there are risks of loss of social relationships as well as mental and emotional burnout (e.g., Vandermeulen et al., 2023), especially among those who also feel despair about the situation despite engaging in collective action (Bird et al., 2024). Despite these negative outcomes, it is submitted that these are outweighed by a host of positive effects that come from participating in protest action.

**Positive Effects of Protests on the Group and Intergroup Level**
Protests also have social psychological and organisational or practical benefits for groups, on both intra- and intergroup levels. On the intragroup level, protests are a site for meeting up with and building community among protesters and members of the organisations and political groups putting on the protests (e.g., Khan et al., 2016). The shared social space further strengthens new emerging social identities, their cohesion and organisational ties, as well as exchanging information and providing further political education and news. This is especially important in contexts where the official media is repressing information or framing the events in problematic ways. Furthermore, plans for upcoming events and follow up protests and other important aspects of organising happen at the site of the protest, especially at protests that include rallies in addition to marches and those that involve speakers and speak-outs or open mics (e.g., Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013). Vitally, new members who are not yet organised into a political group may also be recruited or receive information on how to join such groups at protests themselves.

Additionally, there are positive intergroup consequences of protests that are organised or attended by members of different groups and constituents (Acar & Uluğ, 2019). Many of the current protests demanding a ceasefire in Gaza are organised jointly by Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, and other groups representing different political ideologies, faiths, or ethnic and racial backgrounds (e.g., Hicks, 2023). This shared action can create new or further strengthen existing coalitions. In the context of the current moment, one of the coauthors of this piece who has been organising with Jewish Voice for Peace in the United States has observed the powerful effect of protesting alongside Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim individuals and groups as a member of a visibly Jewish, anti-Zionist organisation standing in full solidarity with Palestine. While many who are not in this movement express fears that these protests are antisemitic or that Jews would
be unsafe there, her experience at the protests has been the exact opposite—she has experienced a lot of respect and appreciation for the Jewish organisations and protesters showing up in solidarity with Palestine. As Jewish Voice for Peace writes in one of their texts, “True safety is built through forging real solidarity with all those fighting for a more liberated world.” (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2023).

The diverse composition of solidarity protests bears important consequences for mobilising public support for the Palestinian cause in the Global North. By bringing together allies from various ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, the protests have been able to increase empathy for and direct attention to Palestinian suffering and shift social norms. Just like the once-radical notion of “Defund the Police” became more normative in mainstream liberalism in the US through the Black Lives Matter movement (Jackson et al., 2023), we are currently observing growing public acceptance of terms such as settler-colonialism, apartheid, or genocide to describe the violence committed by the Israeli state against Palestinians. It is clear, then, that norm changes can occur because of solidarity and allyship. Research on allyship suggests that people who mobilise in solidarity with another group are seen as conscious constituents (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) who act on their moral values and not for their self-interest. Because allies are more likely to be perceived as moral exemplars or role models who have the power to shape their group’s norms (Louis et al., 2009), their presence at the protests may inspire others to join the cause (Kutlaca et al., 2022; Radke et al., 2020).

However, while mobilising previously passive observers to join solidarity protests and act as allies can help build power in numbers, their presence does not guarantee the movement’s success. First, some work finds that the authorities and power-holders may push back harder if they perceive advantaged allies involved in a movement as ideological opponents (Hartwich et
al., 2023). This may help explain why despite overwhelming public support and huge protests in countries like the US and the UK, the political elite is still unable to agree and call for a ceasefire. Second, many sympathetic observers, especially those from privileged backgrounds, may only remain superficially involved with the cause and drop out quickly if the actions become too inconvenient, demand resources and/or threaten their personal image (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Radke et al., 2020). Heavy protest policing, the fear of being labelled as antisemitic — a powerful tool of the current repression of Palestine solidarity (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2023) - or as radical threatens to outweigh the empathy and the concern for the Palestinian cause among observers from privileged backgrounds, putting extra burden on committed activists to carry on alone.

The impact of pro-Palestinian marches on Palestinians can be complex and multifaceted, evoking mixed emotions. Yet, these marches hold profound significance for many, offering a sense of validation and solidarity amidst decades of suffering and occupation. For over 75 years, Palestinians have endured silence, denial of traumas, and unacknowledged suffering (Berger, 2006; Sayigh, 2015). Witnessing thousands of allies unite in support of their rights and aspirations provides long-awaited acknowledgement and social recognition. Moreover, for younger generations, witnessing pro-Palestinian demonstrations can feel like a significant victory (Yousuf, 2023). Israeli propaganda, known as Hasbara, has long dominated mainstream media due to its access and resources. However, on social media, despite having almost no resources and battling against biased censorship, the Palestinian narrative has gained traction (Qarjouli, 2023). Based on the observations of the Palestinian coauthor, the protests that are widely shared on social media may reassure younger Palestinians that they are successfully conveying their cause to the world and their message is being heard. At the same time, when Palestinians watch
the solidarity marches in Western countries, they often feel a deep sense of frustration, recognizing the familiar helplessness the marchers might feel about swaying their governments' policies regarding the unfolding tragedy of genocide (OHCHR, 2023). Yet, the heartbreaking failure of the countries in power to defend human rights is still liberating to some Palestinians—who, to paraphrase Audre Lorde (2018), may come to understand that merely adopting their colonisers’ tools to articulate their suffering is insufficient to dismantle colonisation. The once-held belief in the ‘civilised’ nature of first-world countries’ commitment to human rights and international law now is clearly an illusion. The international community demonstrates both the will and capacity to enforce international law in certain situations, such as the war against Ukraine. However, there appears to be a deficiency in either will or capability when it comes to addressing the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, despite the fading hope for stopping the current atrocities by opening the world’s eyes to them, the resilience shown through continued large-scale demonstrations offers a glimmer of optimism, particularly for Palestinians outside Gaza. Many interpret these protests as indicative of a shifting global sentiment, potentially heralding a turning point in support for the Palestinian cause in the long run. However, signs of cessation of demonstrations and other forms of support intensify the fear among many Palestinians that their cause is being treated as a passing trend, subject to fatigue or waning interest over time, or due to a gradual decline in the severity of the injustices faced. This further deepens the frustration over the long-established status quo that the Israeli military occupation seeks to maintain.

**Long-term Effects of Protest**

There is historical evidence of the profound impact of protests and social movements on society, such as the American civil rights movement or the women’s movement (McAdam,
These movements also illustrate that change takes time. One could argue that both the women’s movement and the civil rights movement are still far from their end goals. However, what they do demonstrate is the power of people coming together to achieve change, and the power that lies with people when acting collectively. Furthermore, they demonstrate the resilience and sustained action that is needed to achieve change, whether it is in relation to equality, climate, or genocide. Although some in the public sphere argue that protests are alienating and counterproductive, protests acknowledge harm and convey solidarity with Palestinians and empower more people to act. Collectively taking to the streets and demonstrating solidarity can impact society by raising public awareness of issues (Bugden, 2020) and shifting norms, which in turn can mobilise further support. Additionally, through public support and awareness, protests and movements have the ability to eventually affect policy changes by increasing public pressure on policy and decision-makers (e.g., Fisher, 2019). Hence, protests in solidarity, such as the current worldwide pro-Palestine marches, can have an impact on multiple levels, from those affected to the protesters, bystanders, and society at large. In conclusion, even when the efficacy of protests is not immediately apparent and there are many reasons for despair, solidarity is crucial, and efficacy can show up in many different forms in the short and long term.
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