

# Foreign Students' Experience during a Time of War

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**ABSTRACT:** **Background:** Due to the war in Gaza in 2009, Ben-Gurion University's Medical School for International Health with a student body of 165 international multicultural students canceled a week of classes. Third-year students continued clerkships voluntarily and fourth-year students returned to Israel before departing for electives in a developing country. A debriefing session was held for the entire school.

**Objectives:** To assess the academic and psychological effects of political conflict on students.

**Methods:** We asked all students to fill out an anonymous Google electronic survey describing their experience during the war and evaluating the debriefing. A team of students and administrators reviewed the responses.

**Results:** Sixty-six students (40% of the school) responded (first year 26%, second year 39%, third year 24%, fourth year 8%, taking time off 3%, age 23–40 years old). Eighty-three percent were in Israel for some portion of the war and 34% attended the debriefing. Factors that influenced individuals' decision to return/stay in the war zone were primarily of an academic and financial nature. Other factors included family pressure, information from peers and information from the administration. Many reported psychological difficulties during the war rather than physical danger, describing it as “draining” and that it was difficult to concentrate while studying. As foreigners, many felt their role was undefined. Although there is wide variation in the war's effect on daily activities and emotional well-being during that time, the majority (73%) reported minimal residual effects.

**Conclusions:** This study lends insight to the way students cope during conflict and highlights academic issues during a war. Open and frequent communication and emphasis on the school as a community were most important to students.

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**KEY WORDS:** war, medical education, conflict, international health

the expiration of a 6 month ceasefire, rocket fire from Hamas reached Beer Sheva for the first time. Israeli forces responded with “Operation Cast Lead,” which later included a ground offensive into Gaza. The fighting continued until 18 January with a unilateral Israeli ceasefire followed shortly after by a Hamas ceasefire.

Students enrolled in the first 2 years were on vacation and were scheduled to return on 4 January. Third-year students were in clinical rotations at Soroka Medical Center and other collaborating hospitals around Israel. Fourth-year students were in the United States and were scheduled to return on 14 January. Courses at Ben-Gurion University were officially cancelled, but clinical activities continued with various safety measures. To fulfill clinical requirements, third-year students who did not feel comfortable in Beer Sheva were provided with an alternative location in Israel for the duration of the war. Throughout the war, emails with updates on the situation in Beer Sheva were sent to students and meetings were held in Beer Sheva for security updates. Some students chose to remain in Beer Sheva or return during the war despite alternative options provided. Approximately one week after students resumed classes, a gathering was organized to process the experience as a school. Attendance was recommended but was not mandatory. Sixty students attended the gathering and were divided into groups to discuss their experience with facilitators. Students were made aware of available counseling services.

With increasing numbers of globally oriented schools and residency programs [1-3], the potential for disruption of academic studies due to political conflict or natural disaster is also increasing. There are few examples in the literature of foreign students caught in the center of conflict [4]. The present study describes a) the factors that influenced students' decisions to stay in Beer Sheva, b) their experience of the war as foreigners, c) their expectations of the faculty and the administration during the war, and d) their need for ongoing support.

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Students enrolled in Ben-Gurion University's Medical School for International Health in collaboration with Columbia University Medical Center hold a variety of cultural, religious and political beliefs and come to Beer Sheva, Israel to learn skills in cross-cultural medicine. In December 2008, after

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Six months after the ceasefire, all students enrolled for the academic year of 2008–2009 and had one month to voluntarily complete an anonymous electronic survey comprising closed

and open-ended questions concerning their experience of the war. Likert scales, from 0 to 10, indicating the war's effect on their daily activities and emotional state were also included: 0 = not affected at all and 10 = severely affected. Participants were entered into a raffle for two \$50.00 gift certificates for textbooks.

Responses were transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. SPSS was used to calculate frequency tables and *t*-tests comparing responders to the total MSIH student population. Three of the authors individually reviewed the open-ended questions, coded according to consensus, and tabulated the frequency of each theme. Interesting and representative quotes were then chosen to enrich the thematic data. The study was exempted for full review by the Soroka University Hospital Internal Review Board.

**RESULTS**

Of the 171 eligible students, 66 (38.6%) responded to the survey. These responders included 26% first-year, 39% second-year, 24% third-year, and 8% fourth-year students, as well as 3% students on leave of absence. Responders in the fourth year and on leave of absence were excluded from the quantitative analysis due to the small sample and their lack of exposure to the experience.

The average age of responders was 26.5 (SD 4.41) [Table 1]. Of the 59 students who responded to the survey, 65.5% (n=38) were not in Beer Sheva at the onset of the war, roughly two-thirds of them (64.9%, n=24) in North America. Most of these students returned to Israel (94.7%, n=36), almost all to Beer Sheva. Eighty percent (n=16) of the students in Beer Sheva at the onset of war were third-year students in clinical rotations. Of the 20 students in Beer Sheva at the onset of war, 10 left Beer Sheva for other Israeli locations.

The general experience of the students during the war was one of distress and anxiety. Individuals were affected to varying degrees. The decision to remain or return to Beer Sheva during the war was mainly influenced by the desire to continue with plans and resume classes in addition to the perception of minimal risk and the feeling that Beer Sheva was home [Table 2]:

MSIH = Ben-Gurion University's Medical School for International Health

**Table 1.** Summary of differences between responders and total MSIH population

	Responders (n=65)	MSIH students (n=171)	t-score/chi square	Pvalue
Age	26.5 ± 4.41	28.15 ± 3.98	-2.375 (-2.39, -0.21)	0.021
Male	32.3 (21)	42.7 (73)	2.12	0.146
Female	67.7 (44)	57.3 (98)		
Married	15.4 (10)	19.9 (34)	0.63	0.428
Not married	84.6 (55)	80.1 (137)		

"In reality, I really want to be a doctor; I've worked hard to get here... aside from a nuclear attack, I have no intention of abandoning my studies for any reason"

"I stayed in Beer Sheva the whole time... [We] felt that it never got dangerous enough for us to leave..."

"I strangely felt like I needed to be here, with my friends and home that is here. It was too weird seeing it all on TV."

**REASONS STUDENTS LEFT BEER SHEVA DURING THE WAR**

The main reason students chose to be away from Beer Sheva during the war was the perception of a high risk of danger in staying [Table 3]:

"I felt that the situation was being minimized by the administration and, as a non-Hebrew speaker, didn't feel able to get a true perspective on what was happening"

"[I felt] unsafe in the place that I was living, and any time I needed to leave the house."

The majority of students (98.2%, n=55, confidence interval 90.6–99.7) were in regular contact with friends or family during the Gaza War. Although some families were comforting or reassuring, they generally had an anxiety-provoking influence on students' emotional state. One student commented about his/her parents:

"Their anxiety was very high and I felt guilty for putting them through it. It's one thing to be caught in a war. It's another thing to willingly, knowingly choose to be in the middle of one. I felt it was unfair to stay when they were begging me to come home."

**Table 2.** Reasons students stayed or returned to Beer Sheva during the war (n=53)

Reason	% (n)	CI
Attend classes	62.3 (33)	49.2–75.3
Perceived minimal risk	39.6 (21)	26.5–52.8
"Beer Sheva is home"	22.6 (12)	11.4–33.9
No adequate alternative	17.0 (9)	6.9–27.1
Continue plans	18.9 (10)	8.3–29.4
Financial concerns	11.3 (6)	2.8–19.9
Curiosity/experience	5.7 (3)	1.9–15.4
Resist terrorism	3.8 (2)	1.0–12.8
Other	1.9 (1)	0.3–9.9

CI = confidence interval

**Table 3.** Reasons students left Beer Sheva during the Gaza War (n=10)

Reason	% (n)	CI
Perceived high risk	80.0 (8)	49.0–94.3
Continue plans	50.0 (5)	19.0–81.0
Difficulty concentrating or sleeping	20.0 (2)	5.7–51.0
Family influence	1.0 (1)	1.8–40.4

**EFFECT OF THE WAR ON STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL STATE**

Of the 57 responders to this question, 42.1% (n=24, CI 29.3–54.9) reported that the war significantly affected their emotional state, correlating to a 6 or higher on the Likert scale. However, the range of responses varied widely. The most common feelings reported were “nervous,” “stressed,” “agitated,” and/or “on edge.” There were no statistically significant differences of effect on emotional state based on demographics. Responses were vivid and varied:

“Listen, I was devastated. I wasn't sleeping, there was a perpetual knot in my stomach, I couldn't handle other people discussing the war, I was a mess...”

“I was surprisingly calm and didn't stress too much. I felt supported by my school and had resources to get away if I had to. I was more tense being around classmates whose stress levels were higher than mine because I didn't know how to help them”

“I realized I could never take the calm quiet life of Beer Sheva for granted ever again.”

**DAILY ACTIVITIES**

Of the 58 responders to this question, 44.8% (n=26, CI 32.0–57.6) stated that the war had a significant impact on their daily activities (score ≥ 6). The daily activities of females were statistically significantly more affected than those of their male classmates (chi square 4.64, P = 0.001), though no other factors differed significantly. The majority made changes to their daily routine by minimizing the time they spent outside, planning their activities near bomb shelters and following the news more often. Responses varied considerably, as follows:

“I carried on as usual, albeit more cautiously. I still walked to the grocery store and went running regularly, although I always had my eye on somewhere to duck if I had to”

“I was unable to study. I spent much more time in my apartment (I hardly left). I was obsessed with the news and could not think of anything but the war. Simple trips that I usually took had to be planned with a contingency plan, in the event that a siren went off.”

**STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE AS FOREIGNERS**

Students' experience of the war was colored by their experience as foreigners, with varying language fluency and a wide range of perceptions as part of the local community:

“I have no family here. I have no real stake in the outcome of the war since I can leave if things get bad. But the knowledge of this privilege or that many others don't have the ability to leave their much worse situation was difficult to stomach everyday as I read the news”

“The limitation of not knowing what my neighbors knew, for example, a false alarm, made me very frustrated. This added to my dependence on MSIH emails, which I grew to distrust and added to my frustration.”

CI = confidence interval

Several responses conveyed a sense of guilt for being in a place where “people are dying within miles of where I study.” Many expressed a desire to volunteer or help with relief work.

**STUDENTS' COPING STRATEGIES**

Students coped primarily through community with friends and family as well as a variety of other individual activities [Table 4]. Some students exhibited a propensity towards grouping with like-minded individuals and avoided those with opposing political views. Others supported one another despite varying views:

“[I] talked about it with others who felt the same way as I did and tried to avoid others who thought the war was nothing but good”

“The experience really brought my class together, all petty conflicts were pushed aside and people were all supportive and caring.”

**RESIDUAL PERCEIVED EFFECTS**

Some students mention that hearing sounds similar to the rocket-warning siren caused them to “jump,” but the majority did not perceive severe residual effects from the war. However, evidence of broken relationships between various members of the school is a common theme of many (n=18) responses:

“Many of us did not come here willing to risk our lives for the cause of this country and therefore, the effects of the war are very different for us...This issue is always under the surface and many people in my class do not have much understand[ing] of the history or current political situation.”

**COMMUNICATION ISSUES**

Students were not asked about communication with the administration. However, it was evident from their responses that there was a communication breakdown during the war. The following themes described students' perspective of the administration's actions: minimization of the situation, false

**Table 4.** Coping strategies of students during the Gaza War (n=35)

Response	% (n)	CI
Talking to friends/family	71.4 (25)	56.5–86.4
Gathering with classmates	22.9 (8)	8.9–36.8
Writing/journaling	22.9 (8)	8.9–36.9
Prayer/meditation	17.1 (6)	4.7–29.6
Nothing/no need	8.6 (3)	3.0–22.4
Food/alcohol/smoking	8.6 (3)	3.0–22.4
Exercise	8.6 (3)	3.0–22.4
Avoiding/grouping	5.7 (2)	1.6–18.6
Humor	5.7 (2)	1.6–18.7
Other	20.0 (7)	6.7–33.3

predictions of the course of the war, lack of information, lack of a clear contingency plan, and infrequent personal contact. Student responses relevant to communication with the administration varied widely. Some students felt increased stress and resentment; others did not:

“The war was a great opportunity for the school to come together as a community, which it did, within the student body. It is unfortunate that the war, instead, further widened the large gap between the students and the administration”

“[The school] is run by humans, and as humans we were all somewhat taken off guard and needed some time to adjust to a new situation.”

## DISCUSSION

Continuing plans and attending classes were a major concern for all students and may have influenced assessment of risk. Although classes were cancelled and options for relocation were offered to students in the third year, many still mention returning to class as the main influence on their decision to return. This was evident in responses that listed a fear of falling behind or not graduating on time as a contributing factor. It is possible that there was also an underlying competition as some students mentioned the feeling of being considered “weak” for leaving or “more accepted” for staying. Those who left perceived their risk as high while those who stayed perceived their risk as low. Other factors influencing risk assessment include: the opinion of family members, trust in the information provided by the administration, ability to obtain information as a foreigner, past experience in conflict situations, and feeling supported by and/or tied to the community. Some also saw the war as a type of character-building experience while others were not willing to risk their lives for this cause. In addition, many students expressed a sense of guilt about being “safe” and “studying” while there was a war in close proximity. At MSIH, where many students are interested in human rights issues, not having a defined helping role was a dilemma.

Personality and coping strategies play an important role in risk assessment [5]. The human response to stress is described as a series of events including an external stimulus, the perception of the stimulus as a threat, the assessment of an individual’s ability to cope with the threat, and the resulting decision to flee or fight [6]. Anxiety can be beneficial in motivating students to take safety precautions. However, worry beyond a certain threshold may be counterproductive and lead to apathy or inability to cope. Paton et al. [7] describe three main factors that motivate people to prepare for earthquakes: risk perception, hazard awareness, and anxiety. Following through with intentions to prepare for a crisis is influenced by the sense of community, trust in information sources, perception of personal responsibility for preparedness, and perception of hazard frequency. In a recent study by Lee and Lemyre

[8] on the perspective of terrorism risk and individual response in Canada, worry was found to be independently influential on behavioral responses to terrorism. Worry, or “relative risk appraisal” [9], was positively correlated with perceived probability of a terrorist attack and personal impact of that attack. Worry was negatively correlated with perceived coping efficacy and seriousness of the threat. This paradoxical result was potentially due to an apathetic response to extremely serious threats beyond individual control.

The results of our study reflect the complexity of interactions between risk assessment, perceived threat, and the level of anxiety that influenced the decision to leave or stay in Beer Sheva during the war [10]. The factor of most concern from a programmatic standpoint is the role of the institution in mitigating the level of worry or anxiety that students experienced. Although information must be given to provoke enough concern for students to take safety precautions, it must be provided in a way that lessens unnecessary anxiety, encourages positive coping strategies, and allows students to make an accurate assessment of their risk so they are able to make well-informed decisions and reduce the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms [11].

## STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE

The perceived effect of the war on students’ emotional state and daily activities spanned the entire spectrum of responses. Many students were agitated, nervous and hyperaware, minimized time spent outside, and planned their daily route with the nearest bomb shelter in mind. Others felt there was little to no change in their daily life and routine. Most students coped by contacting friends and family at home, supporting the notion that social support is a key element in coping with threat [12]. Surprisingly, most students also found their family members to be anxiety provoking during the war.

The third-year students had the lowest response rate despite being the most exposed to the war. This group was likely either highly affected and unwilling to discuss it or were minimally affected. The level of integration each student achieved as a foreigner in Beer Sheva, as well as their personal ties to Israel, seem to have affected students’ coping, as did the degree to which they relied on the administration for assistance. This suggests a need to evaluate how well students are integrating into the greater community during the course of the program, especially as the literature shows that a “sense of belonging” reduces post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms [13].

Our findings also suggest that there may be cross-cultural communication issues between students and administration. While many members of the administration are American-born or have extensive experience with American culture, they may have adopted Israeli cultural norms such as attitude to and experience of political conflict including habituation [14]. As a school whose goal is to train cultur-

ally competent practitioners, we still struggle with our own internal cultural differences.

**UPDATES**

Since the study findings were presented to the school, the administration has created a committee to address the issues raised. The committee has consulted with the head of the hospital as well as security officials of Beer Sheva to develop measures to prepare students for possible threats to security. These include solutions to increase communication between security command and students, orientation, planning, and security drills. There have been several rocket attacks and additional conflict since this study was conducted, and the general sentiment is that students are better prepared and guided than in the past.

**LIMITATIONS**

A low response rate, selection bias, and small sample size are the major limitations to this study. Demographic descriptions were also limited due to the small population and identity disclosure. The authors are also students and administrators of the school who were present in Beer Sheva during the war and therefore bring their own bias to the interpretation of the findings.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This qualitative and quantitative study lends insight to the way students make decisions and cope during conflict and highlights communication and programmatic issues during a war. The survey allowed a forum for students to voice their experiences in an anonymous manner and helped to implement change in the school's administration regarding security threats. Open and frequent communication, as well as emphasis on the school as a community, was most important to students. Clear contingency plans outlined before a conflict occurs as well as identification of cultural differences between administration and students may also enhance the decision-making process as well as the sense of security. Helping students define a role in the community may help them to cope in such conflicts. Our experiences may be useful to medical schools, residency

programs, and other international programs that continue to function during times of conflict.

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**“You can live to be a hundred if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be a hundred”**

Woody Allen (b. 1935), American screenwriter, director, actor, comedian, author, playwright and musician. He developed the persona of an insecure, intellectual, fretful nebbish which he insists is quite different from his real-life personality. A British survey ranked Allen the third greatest comedian

**“By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest”**

Confucius (551-479 BCE), Chinese teacher, politician and philosopher, who emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity