

Between Two Invisibilities: How East Jerusalem Students Craft Identity, Survival, and Academic Voice in a Fragmented City

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Abstract:

East Jerusalem students enter Israeli higher-education spaces carrying a reality unlike any other group in the region: a life shaped by legal residency without political belonging, a Palestinian cultural core unfolding within an Israeli academic structure, and a daily negotiation between visibility and erasure. This research, based on in-depth interviews with 30 first-year students, explores how young Palestinians from East Jerusalem construct identity, agency, and survival strategies inside a system not designed for their linguistic, cultural, or political realities. The findings reveal a powerful paradox: while students undergo rapid academic integration, they simultaneously experience deep existential dislocation. Hebrew becomes a tool of necessity rather than identity; classroom dialogue feels foreign after years of monologic schooling; and social interaction is filtered through layers of fear, stereotypes, and cultural vulnerability. Students navigate a triple threshold of adaptation—linguistic displacement, cultural fragility, and institutional ambiguity—each shaping their sense of belonging and academic confidence. Their coping mechanisms form an invisible architecture of resilience: reliance on Arabic-speaking staff, quiet peer networks, selective withdrawal from Hebrew-based services, spiritual grounding, and constant recalibration of self-presentation in mixed environments. These strategies reflect not weakness but sophisticated forms of cultural navigation and identity management. The study positions East Jerusalem students as a distinct academic minority whose experience transcends traditional categories of access and achievement. Their journey demonstrates how higher education becomes a liminal space where identity is continually reconstructed under asymmetrical cultural, political, and linguistic pressures. The research calls for a radical reimagining of diversity and inclusion in Israeli academia—one that acknowledges structural exclusion, adopts culturally grounded pedagogies, and develops support systems anchored in language, identity, and psychological safety. Ultimately, East Jerusalem students emerge not as passive subjects of policy but as active meaning-makers who reshape the academic sphere through their presence, struggle, and insistence on belonging.