




From University to Community

A guide to accompanying
graduate students arriving
to Turtle Island (Canada)
from Palestine

2024



“ They are there all right, but the narrative of their present actuality – which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel – that narrative is not.

- Edward Said (Permission to Narrate)

Congratulations! Your brilliant graduate student has arrived!

As we continue to navigate our higher ed institutions which are embedded in settler-colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and anti-Palestinian racism, we can support students arriving from Gaza through their research and studies with a trauma-informed graduate supervisory stance.

Trauma-informed practices are well-established in social work and education approaches and **offer ways to anticipate and proactively respond to the presence and impacts of trauma.**



Recommended read

- McChesney, K. (2022). A rationale for trauma-informed postgraduate supervision. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(5), 1338–1360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2145469>
- Fúnez-Flores, J. I. (2024). The Coloniality of Academic Freedom and the Palestine Exception. *Middle East Critique*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2024.2375918>

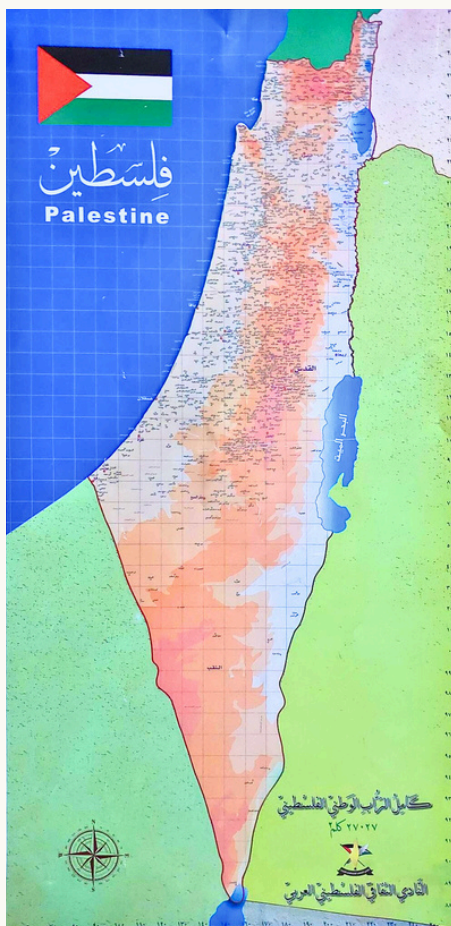


About the mission

PSSAR is a volunteer-based, non-profit, and apolitical organization based in Canada. Our objective is to empower Palestinian students and scholars through global academic solidarity.

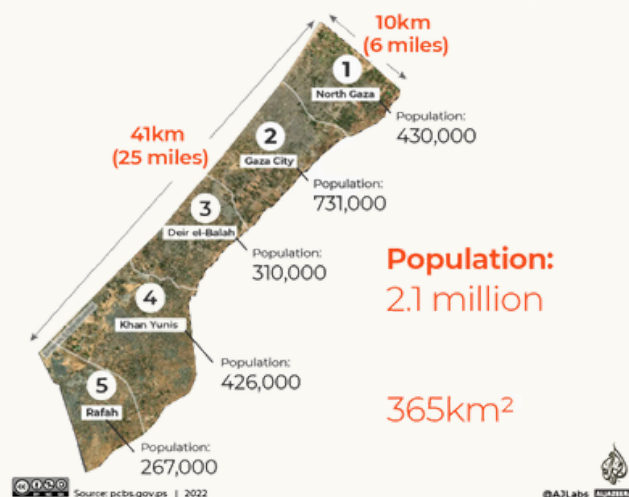
As part of PSSAR's mission and work since October 2023, Palestinian students from the Gaza Strip have been matched with university researchers from several regions in Turtle Island (Canada).

Where is Palestine?



The entire Palestinian national territory, 27027 km², the Arab Palestinian Cultural Club (APCC, n.d.)

Where is the Gaza strip?



A map of the demography of Gaza strip's districts (Al-Jazeera, 2022)



SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS WHEN THEY ARRIVE TO CANADA

Hearing stories about conflict in other countries can evoke a range of emotions for those of us living in relative peace. For individuals experiencing these traumas firsthand and leaving their country of origin, the **emotional impact can be profound, stirring up many memories, feelings, and reactions.**

Fleeing a war-torn country and having one's nation face possible genocide, is a very challenging experience. Your student will likely **have left family members, homes, pets, jobs, careers and their social community.** They likely **witnessed the destruction of their home and their friends and family killed.**

Upon arrival in Canada, these students will continue to watch the destruction of their homeland, from afar. They are most likely still grappling with the realization that their land and people are being murdered in what the International Court of Justice called a **plausible genocide** in January 2024.

Domicide

is the **massive, arbitrary destruction of civilian housing** in violent conflict. According to the UN's housing rights expert, it should be recognized as a **crime under international law.**



Civilian infrastructure
destroyed



215,137 homes
damaged

The damage inflicted has rendered **neighbourhoods** and **streets unrecognisable and uninhabitable.** The water treatment plants, the agricultural land and the cultural and historical heritage were particularly affected.

The devastation caused by domicide **goes beyond material loss;** it also affects **memories, a sense of belonging** and identity (Azzouz, 2022).

Genocide

On 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) warned of a **plausible risk of genocide** of the Palestinian people in Gaza and ordered **6 provisional measures** to prevent it. In view of the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the intensification of the Israeli military offensive, the ICJ is called upon to **reconsider its provisional measures twice**, on 28 March and 24 May 2024. The latest additional measures require the occupation to **halt its offensive and ensure the delivery and accessibility of humanitarian aid.**





Nevertheless, the students and their families arriving in Canada are **resisting** this destruction and violence, **persevering** through their education.




Al-Sumud through education

After 1948, education was seen as **a vehicle for reconstruction, social mobility, and decolonial liberation**. The importance attached to education is reflected in the high literacy rate of 97.7% (PCBS, 2021).

In this context, the pursuit of education is both a **coping mechanism and an act of resistance**, a manifestation of **Al-Sumud** (perseverance). This central dimension of Palestinian culture takes the form of an **unshakeable determination to fight to preserve its existence in the face of occupation and oppression**. Al-Sumud transcends the concept of resilience, since it involves **both individual and collective action**. It embodies **Palestinian resistance** and the refusal to give in despite the circumstances (Hammad and Tribe, 2020).



 It might be helpful to **ask your student how their accompanying children and spouse are doing**.
Have they found a school for them? Child care services?
A job?

Adjusting to this move, which was not necessarily a choice and was not planned, is very difficult. There may be many **barriers to settling in Canada**. The obvious ones might be **language barriers, social customs, and other cultural norms** such as food eaten. Many PSSAR students are able to arrive with their families and their children. While this is a blessing it can also create additional challenges related to the needs and comfort zones of each individual in the family system.





For the student that you are welcoming, there will be the addition barrier of adapting to the Canadian academic institution's implicit epistemological, cultural, and academic norms.

This is a barrier that you are well-placed to reduce or address.

One of the most important things we can do as a research director welcoming a student from Gaza or any other part of Occupied Palestine is to tap into our capacity for **empathy** and **sympathy**.

Empathy VS Sympathy

Ability to put oneself in another position, to understand and share the feelings of another without replicating their experience.



Ability to recognize someone else's emotions and feeling concern for them, without necessarily sharing in their emotions.



A few things to consider when exchanging with your student

You will be meeting with them regularly to talk about their graduate work. But there are a lot of considerations when migrating to a new country that you can ask them about.

One subject at a time

Ask them bit by bit, not all of these topics need to be covered in one meeting or call!



- Immigration and status in Canada
- Health
- Employment and finances
- Social services
- Education and childcare
- Housing
- Spirituality and religion





BUILDING SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Many of your students may find that the way people in Canada interact with them is unfamiliar. Even if you are from Palestine or the SWANA region, you might interact in a more 'Canadian' fashion. It will take time for our PSSAR students to adjust, but in the meantime, **each one of you can begin to adjust to them.**



Collaborative Support

No one person can give everything a PSSAR student needs. Working in community and working together will be important. Stay in touch with the PSSAR team. Everyone in the community will be helping in different ways. Regardless of what you are able to give as we welcome people from other countries into Canada, it is important to try to understand, even in a small way, the other person's experience.



Pathways are diverse and unique

Every PSSAR student's experience and trajectory is unique. Personal experiences are heterogenous, despite having common life conditions. Like any other community, Palestinians are not a homogenous group. Not everyone will have a difficult time adjusting, whilst some students and their families may find it very challenging.





HOW CAN YOU HELP AS A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR?

Canada is often seen like “a very open country” where people are considered to be “friendly and chatty”. This means that it is a cultural norm to want to get to know others and ask questions about how they are doing and about their life.

People who arrive to Canada are often asked about “where they come from” and “why did they come”.

When someone moves here from a war-torn country or to escape a genocide, **they may or may not want to talk about it**. For some it might be too traumatic, for others it may be a relief to discuss their feelings and experiences.



In both cases, **listening** to individuals or families recounting their stories of trauma **might also impact you**.

If you notice this, **take a break, speak with a colleague or friend, or reach out to the PSSAR team**.



Going beyond the traditional professor-graduate student relationship



Expectations and cultural norms

There are also **specific cultural norms** to the inner working of Canadian universities. Your students from Gaza might have **different expectations** of their interactions with you, compared to students who have been living in Canada for a long time.

For example, you might want to touch base with them regarding your role, how they can address you, how to contact you and how often. They may not inform you of academic problems, even if you ask them. Supporting a PSSAR student might require homing in on those **empathy** and **compassion** skills, as well as on **listening** skills.

Other actions you can take include remembering that your student is a person with a complex inner and outer life, just like you. They have a history, likes, dislikes, family, job, responsibilities, and will be juggling with adjusting to living in Canada. It is important to **recognise** that we can sometimes be **patronising when we are trying to help**. To counter-balance this, you can **focus on your students' knowledge of themselves and their experience** and **ask them** what they need or want when they are facing a challenge, be it academically, socially, or relationally.



Remember that our academic environment and expectations of graduate students are high paced and intense. Some of your PSSAR students may **need time to adjust, but this might not be the case for everyone**. Don't hesitate to **check in with them regularly**.

A FEW REFLEXIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AS YOU WAIT FOR YOUR PSSAR STUDENT TO ARRIVE



- How do I feel and think about Palestine?
- Should I contact the student that I am matched with before they arrive?
 - Do I have the same role with the student from Gaza as I do with my other students? (social/emotional roles)
- What happens if a student tells me something uncomfortable?
- What happens if a student's family member is killed?
- What kinds of emotions might my students experience?
- What kinds of behaviors might be a normal response to the experience of leaving home, having been displaced?
- Decrease in motivation for studies, what should I do?
- My student seems unmotivated or is having trouble organizing themselves. Is my student experiencing a mental health issue?

Not necessarily! It is important to discuss with your student, and refer her to organization that work with PSSAR.

- Do I know the services in my university?
 - Do I know who to contact for housing? Health? Etc.
- Will there be a cultural clash? Academic cultural clashes?
 - Different learning systems
- What if coming to study with me doesn't work out for the student?

● How might I feel about that?



PSSAR

PALESTINIAN STUDENTS & SCHOLARS AT RISK INITIATIVE

Content and research

Emmanuelle Khoury, PhD, Social Work, University of Montreal

Aïda Benaguida, doctoral student, Psychoeducation, University of Montreal

Aline Bogossian, PhD, Social Work, University of Montreal

Rola Koubeissy, PhD, Psychopedagogy, University of Montreal

Roxane Caron, PhD, Social Work, University of Montreal

Formatting and design

Aïda Benaguida, doctoral student, Psychoeducation, University of Montreal