

# Leading schools through wartime in Palestine

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633

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research explores the experiences and leadership strategies of school principals navigating the war in Palestine. It aims to understand how these principals are leading their school communities amidst armed conflict.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 school principals in Gaza and its surrounding regions and analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings** – Our findings reveal that school principals in Palestine faced prolonged school closures, heavy damage to school infrastructure, severe staff shortages and shortage of resources, all while working to safeguard students and staff amid ongoing security threats. They demonstrated adaptive leadership by adjusting decisions to rapidly changing conditions, implementing alternative modes of education and placing a strong emphasis on the well-being of both students and staff. Principals provided targeted psychological support and introduced flexible arrangements to help sustain morale within their school communities. In addition, leveraging community networks and partnerships with non-government organisations, local authorities and parents emerged as a vital strategy in maintaining school operations and overcoming daily challenges.

**Originality/value** – This research provides important insights into how educational leaders in Palestine sustain education under extreme adversity, offering valuable implications for leadership practices in crisis contexts.

**Keywords** School leadership, Wartime, Palestine

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

Today's school leaders are faced with multiple crises, arguably more than any other in our known history (Adams and Muthiah, 2020; Alon and Schechter, 2025). Over the last decade, the world has undergone significant catastrophes such as earthquakes, floods, forest fires, climate change, pandemics, conflicts and wars (Arar *et al.*, 2022; Bellibaş *et al.*, 2026; Culha *et al.*, 2025; Gardner-McTaggart, 2022). Leading schools in such crises necessitates a different form of leadership practice (Arar and Saiti, 2022; Bush, 2020) as principals are expected to respond promptly and strategically, make careful decisions considering the consequences, communicate with empathy and humanity, and be a trustworthy voice for the school community (Arar *et al.*, 2025a; Arar and Saiti, 2022; Netolicky, 2020).

Despite the vast number of studies on the role of school leaders during crises (e.g. Arar *et al.*, 2022; Adams *et al.*, 2024; Anderson and Weiner, 2023; Da'as *et al.*, 2025; Smith and



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Riley, 2012), much of this scholarship has focused on episodic crises, such as natural disasters or short-term emergencies. In these studies, schools eventually revert to regular patterns, and the institutional support system has generally remained intact, offering limited insight into contexts where crisis conditions are recurrent and prolonged (Bellibaş *et al.*, 2026; Culha *et al.*, 2025). As a result, there remains a need for research that examines how school leaders navigate crises that are not temporary disruptions, but occur in contexts marked by prolonged uncertainty, ongoing risk, systemic constraint and resource scarcity.

The Palestinian context presents a case of schooling under conditions of protracted conflict. Ongoing war has had major implications for the continuity of education, including damage to infrastructure, disruptions to schooling and limited access to basic needs such as housing, electricity, food, water and healthcare (Iriqat *et al.*, 2025). As a result, these conditions have schools operating under persistent uncertainty and high risk. School leaders are required to manage schools while addressing concerns related to student and staff well-being, displacement, infrastructural resource constraints and unpredictable patterns of school attendance (Arar *et al.*, 2025a).

Education occupies an important role in Palestinian society, particularly under conditions of prolonged conflict and displacement (Arar *et al.*, 2025a). Unlike many crises examined in existing research, school leadership in Palestine is enacted under a prolonged state of conflict rather than during discrete crisis episodes (Abusamra *et al.*, 2023). This differentiates the Palestinian experience from other crisis contexts and highlights the need for context-sensitive research, such as leading in conditions of sustained hardship. In such volatile contexts marked by geopolitical struggle and systemic constraints, principals are not merely educational administrators; they become crisis leaders and source of psychosocial support. School leaders here must navigate trauma, ensure basic needs and foster resilience, all while sustaining education disrupted or obstructed by the ongoing war (Salha and Affouneh, 2023).

This study responds to a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences and leadership strategies of school principals navigating the war in Palestine. It aims to understand how these principals are leading their school communities amidst armed conflict, where schooling is continuously reinvented and redesigned. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the experiences of school principals in Palestine as they lead their school communities through wartime?
- RQ2. What leadership strategies do these principals employ to navigate and sustain schooling during times of crisis?

This article is organised into four sections. First, the theoretical perspectives and literature review synthesise existing scholarship on crisis leadership and leadership in conflict-affected educational settings, establishing the conceptual framing for the study. Second, the research context, methodology and empirical findings are presented. Third, the findings are discussed in relation to existing literature. Finally, the article concludes with implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

### **Theoretical perspectives and literature review**

School leadership in times of crisis, especially in war and system crisis situations, has attracted increased academic attention in the last few decades (Arar *et al.*, 2022; Striepe and Cunningham, 2022). Much of this literature explores the roles, dispositions and practices expected of school leaders when the regular structures are disrupted by exogenous shocks such as pandemics, natural disasters, political instability and armed conflict. This literature has illuminated the important role of school leaders in maintaining continuity in education, building resilience and facilitating the well-being of staff and students in times of social and political upheavals (Buskila *et al.*, 2025). Instead of going through the literature related to the

crisis in general, this section of the article addresses the literature that theorises the roles and models of leadership during crises, such as adaptive leadership, trauma-informed leadership, and distributed or relational leadership. These frameworks go beyond managerial efficiency, and focus instead on morally responsible judgment, responsiveness and capacity-building.

The aim of the review in this section is twofold, namely: to synthesise empirical and conceptual research on school leadership in crises; as well as to elicit a coherent conceptual framework in the light of which leading in the Palestinian wartime context can be construed. Palestine represents an exemplary case of prolonged crisis shaped by political conflict, infrastructure deterioration and systemic constraints on educational provision. In this context, leadership concerns extend beyond continuity of education to addressing the broader conditions that influence the feasibility of educational practice. When access to safety, shelter and food is constrained, leadership priorities are necessarily reordered (Arar *et al.*, 2025b). Consequently, this review focuses on theories of leadership that could describe decision-making, care and coordination under extreme precarity, drawing on adaptive leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009), moral leadership and trauma-informed (Brunzell *et al.*, 2016; Öricü, 2023), and distributed leadership (Harris, 2008).

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks position educational leadership not simply as a process or administrative function, but as a moral, cultural and political practice – particularly in geographies characterised by prolonged instability. Adaptive leadership helps explain how principals adjust decision-making and leadership practices in response to rapidly changing and uncertain conditions (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). In Palestine, leadership often emerges through improvisation within fractured systems, sustained by social capital and community care rather than institutional authority (Simone, 2004). The immediacy of war reconfigures leadership priorities around educational continuity, addressing trauma-related needs and sustaining school functioning under constrained circumstances. Distributed leadership further illuminate how principals mobilise teachers, parents and community when formal institutional structures are weakened (Harris, 2008). Finally, trauma-informed and moral leadership frameworks provide insight into how principals address the psychosocial needs of students and staff while sustaining educational continuity (Brunzell *et al.*, 2016; Öricü, 2023). These perspectives therefore guide the interpretation of the empirical findings presented in this study.

#### *Educational leadership in crisis contexts*

The adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009) has been widely applied to explain how leaders work when challenges cannot be resolved using the current routine or technical solutions. In crisis contexts, leadership changes from exercising control to enabling trust, collaboration and innovation under conditions of uncertainty. Empirical research into school leadership during emergencies shows that principals frequently perform the role of meaning brokers, assisting communities in making sense of emergent events and modifying expectations accordingly (Smith and Riley, 2012; Bush, 2020).

Complementing this perspective, distributed and relational leadership theories (Arar *et al.*, 2025b; Gronn, 2008; Spillane *et al.*, 2006) are those that focus on leadership as an emergent practice that is entrenched by the social relations instead of an individual characteristic (Arar and Saiti, 2022). Studies show that during crises, principals often rely on informal group leaders such as teachers, parents, community organisations to help them continue with schooling when formal systems are disrupted or overwhelmed (Hallinger and Kovačević, 2022). In such contexts, leadership is exercised through trust and relational influence rather than formal authority (Arar and Saiti, 2022).

Striepe and Cunningham (2022) argue that crisis leadership must be studied as a dynamic and situation-specific process of emotional labour, ethical decision making and adaptive pragmatism. Oplatka's (2023) theoretical typology of school crises, between endogenous and exogenous disturbances, is particularly enlightening. He suggests that wartime conditions,

which are defined by infrastructural damage, institutional weakening are exogenous crises that require leadership responses extending beyond conventional organisational routines. Principals typically perform as first responders in these settings to sustain education (Bush, 2020).

The emergence of trauma-informed leadership further highlights the evolving expectations of school leaders in high-adversity settings, including recognising trauma, fostering psychological safety and maintaining supportive organisational cultures (Brunzell *et al.*, 2016; Bellibaş *et al.*, 2026). However, much of this literature focuses on time-limited crises, whereas leadership in conflict zones is characterised by prolonged exposure to instability and crises. Studies from contexts such as Ukraine illustrate how principals become stabilising moral and emotional supports within weakened systems (Hudson *et al.*, 2024). It is this intersection of adaptive, relational and moral leadership that underpins the conceptual framework informing the present study.

#### *Leadership strategies amidst war and upheaval*

The ongoing military conflict has created significant challenges for schools in Palestine. Research by Adams *et al.* (2024) highlights how these dual crises have prompted school leaders to develop hybrid models of learning, establish peer mentoring networks and collaborate with humanitarian organisations. In Gaza, principals faced extreme difficulties, such as a lack of electricity and Internet access, forcing them to rely on oral instruction, family networks and mobile outreach to ensure continuity of education. These situations exemplify the improvisational nature of adaptive leadership during times of systemic breakdown.

Leadership practices in such contexts are often shaped not through formal training but through everyday experiences, moral commitment and deep community ties (Iriqat *et al.*, 2025). Salha and Affouneh (2023) conceptualise this as the “two faces of leadership” in Palestine: one face is formal and bureaucratic, while the other is informal and relational in nature. Principals routinely enact moral leadership (Bush, 2020) by mobilising networks of trust with parents, neighbourhood committees and local non-governmental organisations; coordinating resources and communication; negotiating safe routes or alternative meeting places; and providing flexible time and place of learning at the time that schools have been damaged, or inaccessible. Relational leadership also involves significant emotional labour, including supporting families, assisting staff and sustaining morale amid wartime (Arar *et al.*, 2025b).

Together, these findings support the use of distributed and adaptive leadership theories, which emphasise the need for decentralisation, role flexibility and community co-leadership, especially in the absence of strong institutional structures (Hallinger and Kovačević, 2022).

#### *Educational leadership as resilience*

Understanding leadership in Gaza requires considering the context of resilience. Scholars like Gutman (2025) and Giroux (2025) describe educational leadership in areas affected by prolonged crises as a means of sustaining educational continuity. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2024) documented the destruction of higher education institutions such as the Islamic University of Gaza and analyse its implications for the organisation and continuity of knowledge production.

In this context, school leadership serves as an important site of cultural and epistemic resilience (Arar *et al.*, 2025a). Principals’ decisions whether to reopen schools, provide shelter for displaced families or continue education in improvised spaces carry significant moral weight and are guided by commitments to cultural continuity and epistemic justice (Gutman, 2025). This study highlights Palestinian school leaders who are navigating the challenges of a war siege. It contributes to an emerging field of scholarship that redefines educational leadership in the context of ongoing conflict.

The following section outlines the Palestinian educational context. It highlights the historical and contemporary conditions that shape the practice of school leadership in this setting.

### Research context

Palestine is a region in the Middle East with immense historical, cultural and religious significance. It is regarded as a Holy Land by the three major religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and is home to sites like the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Nativity. Palestine landscape varies from the coastal plains of Gaza Strip to the highlands of the West Bank. The Palestinian identity is rooted in the land and its cultural heritage. Traditional practices such as Tatreez (traditional embroidery) are recognised as part of the region's cultural heritage and the dabke (folk dance) are widely practised and celebrated across Palestinian communities).

The history of wars and crises in Palestine is defined by a century-long struggle for land and sovereignty. Following the 1947 UN Partition Plan, the first Arab-Israeli War led to the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians, an event known as the *Nakba* (Catastrophe). In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Two major Palestinian uprisings, the First Intifada (1987–1993) and the Second Intifada (2000–2005), significantly shaped the political boundaries of the region. Since the Israeli 2007 blockade, Gaza has endured large-scale military operations (notably in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021), resulting in civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. These developments occur within a broader and highly contested conflict in which insecurity and violence are experienced across populations in the region.

Since October 7, 2023, schools and universities in Palestine, particularly in Gaza have been severely affected by military operations. More than 320 schools have been completely destroyed, while 523 schools were partially destroyed. The remaining schools have been repurposed as shelters for displaced people. The ongoing conflict in Gaza has significantly disrupted education, with projections indicating that children and young people may face educational setbacks of up to five years. Moreover, every university in Gaza sustained damage or was destroyed during the escalation of hostilities ([Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024](#); [UNRWA, 2024](#)).

As of December 2025, formal schooling in Gaza has been suspended, with more than 630,000 students unable to access education. As the value of education often increases during times of war, Palestinian educational leaders, including teachers, aim not only to reduce violence but also contribute to rebuilding conflict-affected communities through the promotion of social justice, equality and inclusive citizenship ([Arar et al., 2025a](#); [Adams et al., 2024](#)). They also support students' psychosocial well-being and contribute to longer-term economic and social development ([Kheang et al., 2018](#)). The next section details the methodological approach adopted for this research.

### Method

The study employed a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews. It explores participants' experiences during crises ([Merriam and Tisdell, 2016](#)). Specifically, the study focused on the behaviours, actions and practices of school principals during the ongoing wartime in Palestine.

#### *Participants*

Participants were 13 school principals purposefully selected in Gaza and the West Bank, comprising 5 males and 8 females. The selection criteria included (1) holding the principalship for more than five years, (2) being recognised by their district supervisors as resilient leaders during times of crisis and (3) leading public schools and having direct responsibility for

managing schooling during the ongoing war. Most participants led high schools ( $n = 11$ ), while two were principals of basic schools. All principals had substantial leadership experience, ranging from five to eighteen years in principalship. School enrolments varied from approximately 300 to 1,000 students, with teaching staff numbers ranging between 18 and 41 teachers.

### *Data collection*

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed following a review of the literature on crisis leadership, school leadership during emergencies and leadership in conflict-affected contexts (e.g. [Bush, 2020](#); [Smith and Riley, 2012](#)). The protocol was informed by concepts emerging from this literature, including crisis decision-making, adaptive leadership and continuity of education under extreme conditions.

The interview questions were designed to elicit principals' reflections on: (a) their leadership roles and responsibilities before and during the war and (b) strategies used to sustain schooling and safeguard students and staff. Sample interview questions included: "What are your main responsibilities as a principal during this war conflict?", "What strategies or leadership practices have you found to be most effective?", "What are the biggest challenges you face as a principal during the conflict, both professionally and personally?"

The research was conducted during wartime between September and November 2024. Before data collection began, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of An-Najah National University (NNU). Upon ethics approval, school leaders were contacted via email to explain the purpose of the study. The school leaders were also informed that they could withdraw at any juncture during the interviews. Each principal had provided their informed consent.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted via Zoom with these principals. Each interview was approximately 45 min, and the principals agreed for the interviews to be audio recorded. After data transcription, member checking was performed by providing a few participants with the transcript to verify its accuracy. In order to maintain confidentiality, principals are identified in the form of codes (P1–P13).

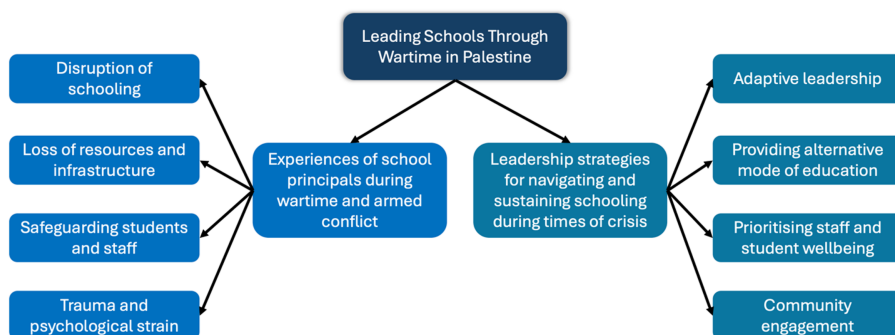
### *Data analysis*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The analytics approach followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase recommendations. At the first stage, the whole data set was transcribed, read and screened to ensure data familiarity. Next, initial codes were formulated, and indicative themes were developed using constant comparative analysis. In the fourth stage, the themes were reviewed again, and minor adjustments were made. In the fifth stage, the final themes were identified and solidified. At the final stage, the findings were reported.

## **Results**

This section of the article presents the findings of school principals' experiences in Palestine as they lead their school communities through wartime. Secondly, it will explore the leadership strategies these principals employ to navigate and sustain schooling during times of crisis. Each theme and subthemes, as shown in [Figure 1](#) will be supported by illustrative quotations from participants' interviews.

### (1) Experiences of school principals during wartime and armed conflict



**Figure 1.** Main themes and subthemes emerged from interviews with principals. Source: Authors' own work

### *Disruption of schooling*

The ongoing war has profoundly disrupted the operation of schools. Many school principals reported prolonged school closures and the conversion of classrooms into shelters for displaced families. These disruptions challenged the continuity of education and transformed the very function of schools. As one principal described, “schools became shelters for thousands of families . . . playgrounds are filled with tents for those who didn’t find any classes left for them to take shelter” (P13). In such settings, principals were forced to change their roles from educational managers to crisis responders, focusing on basic humanitarian needs rather than instructional leadership.

In addition, leadership was further strained by staff shortages and teacher absences. Many teachers were unable to reach their schools due to military checkpoints, airstrikes or personal displacement. For example, one principal reflected, “moving through checkpoints is the most difficult thing that we have faced because we are sometimes prevented from crossing” (P3), while another added, “shortage in teaching staff who are unable to reach the school on time.” (P6). These barriers made it nearly impossible to maintain regular timetables, often leaving principals to manage with minimal staff and improvised school schedules.

In more severe cases, especially in areas like Gaza, school leaders also bore the emotional weight of loss. One principal recounted, “I lost two of my teachers with their families and many students and their family members” (P13). Beyond personal grief, these losses eroded staff morale and further impeded the already fragile educational environment. Thus, leadership in this context required not only adaptability but also emotional resilience to manage grief, uncertainty and organisational instability under war conditions.

### *Loss of resources and infrastructure*

A recurring theme across all interviews with school principals was the severe loss of resources and physical infrastructure in schools. Even before the war, many schools had limited funding and resources. However, the war conflict placed further financial strain on both the school and its surrounding communities. This has had a direct impact on the work of school leaders as all leaders reported a drastic reduction in both government funding and community-based support. As P5 shared, “the financial situation of the local community has worsened.” This meant that principals could no longer rely on parental contributions to maintain the schools. Similarly, P1 elaborated on how even basic contributions from families were no longer possible, “I do believe that now we have a great level of poverty. Even the simple school fees, 40 or 50 shekels, we cannot collect. And I do not put any pressure. I try to collect money from the community to help those who cannot pay and never make them feel less than the others.” As a result, principals increasingly assumed the role of intermediaries, seeking alternative support

from community members while attempting to ensure that students were not excluded from schooling due to economic hardship.

The financial strain also affected school infrastructure and the ability of leaders to maintain safe learning environments. P9 highlighted multiple areas where resources were lacking, noting that *“our school lacks continuous financial support, secure infrastructure, continuous psychological support, and technological training.”* In these conditions, principals were often required to prioritise urgent needs while postponing repairs to school facilities. This constrained their ability to manage schools effectively, as limited resources required leaders to focus on maintaining basic operations rather than improving educational provision.

The lack of technological resources posed another leadership challenge. Several principals noted they were unable to plan or support remote learning when schools were closed or inaccessible. P1 described this as a main barrier to education, explaining that *“we lack the resources of technology. If students cannot come to schools, we cannot continue teaching. The real crisis is in the resources, especially technological resources.”* P3 echoed this concern, stating, *“unfortunately, not all students have the equipment like laptops or computers for online learning.”* These constraints limited principals’ capacity to sustain teaching during periods of heightened insecurity.

In addition to financial and technological deprivation, principals also had to make difficult decisions about resource allocation amid growing hardship. P2 explained, *“the economic situation was very hard because most of the fathers stopped working. Schools and others helped students by buying stationery, pencils, or giving them money to buy necessities. It’s a big challenge.”* Some principals coordinated with community members and local organisations to provide basic learning materials for students. In extreme cases, leaders were unable to ensure even the minimum conditions for schooling, such as access to clean water and electricity. These deficits made teaching and learning extremely difficult, even when students were physically present. P13 shared, *“my school is lacking in every aspect of essential supplies needed in all situations, either during a normal school day or during a hard day. The most important is having financial funding.”* These required principals to continually balance limited resources with the immediate needs of students and staff.

#### *Safeguarding students and staff*

The findings indicate that many principals consistently prioritised the safety of their students and staff during wartime. For P5, the focus was clear, *“protecting students’ lives amidst repeated and unpredictable invasions.”* For P8, *“the security situation, ensuring that both teachers and students can reach the school safely has become the top priority”*. In Gaza, where school infrastructure was heavily damaged, P13 described *“reaching school alive is a challenge, the appearance of students and staff is a great achievement.”* He further added *“being a school leader during the ongoing war is like being a father of a big family that lost in a storm in the middle of the sea.”*

Majority of the principals highlighted the logistical challenges of safeguarding their students and staff. P6 *“worked with the local community and the Directorate to secure safe routes and access points.”* In some cases, safety protocols extended beyond school hours. Both P4 and P9 kept close contact with families to confirm the whereabouts of students and assess risk levels before permitting them to attend school. Few principals shared that the scope of “safety” also included sheltering students during sudden outbreaks of violence. This includes securing classrooms against external threats and managing crowd movement to prevent panic. P11 shared the responsibility of *“protecting female students.”* P2 explained, *“sometimes the soldiers will come around the school. So, I closed all of the doors of the school. They will leave the school”*. These measures often required principals to act swiftly, without waiting for formal directives, reflecting the unpredictability of the threats they faced.

### *Trauma and psychological strain*

Most principals reported intense levels of trauma, anxiety and grief within their school communities. Many described students arriving at school visibly distressed, withdrawn or distracted, often due to personal loss or exposure to violence. Several principals were concerned about the effects of repeated crises, first the disruptions caused by COVID-19, followed by the escalation of armed conflict on students' mental health. As P3 reflected, *"students should learn, we should also keep them in psychologically safe in order not to make them feel afraid or stress or tension."*

Teachers were also severely affected, coping with their own trauma while being expected to provide emotional support to students. P1 shared, *"I try to teach them the right direction for them not to be emotional, but to be logical."* Principals observed student's attendance fluctuated, concentration levels dropped, and, at times, disciplinary issues increased as students struggled with their experiences.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that school principals' experiences during wartime and armed conflict are characterised by pervasive disruption, shortage of resources, increased responsibility for safety and constant psychological strain. These experiences redefined principals' roles beyond school leadership to include crisis management, emotional labour and moral responsibility for safeguarding students and staff under conditions of persistent uncertainty and risk.

### (2) Leadership strategies for navigating and sustaining schooling during times of crisis

#### *Adaptive leadership*

The findings indicate that many principals demonstrated adaptive leadership by abandoning fixed schedules in favour of flexible, situational responses to the challenges of wartime. This adaptability was seen as a survival mechanism as decision-making was frequently made under pressure. Principals constantly monitored news, communicating with local authorities, and maintained active communication with parents in order to decide whether to open or close schools and alter schedules. It enabled principals to respond to constantly changing security conditions, address staff shortages and manage limited resources. For P4, this meant a *"willingness to change your daily plan according to circumstances,"* recognising that any day's plan could be disrupted within minutes depending on emerging threats. Similarly, P5 reflected that they need to *"adapt to each new development daily, focusing on safety and learning as much as possible in fear of any emergency."* Adaptive leadership in this context meant prioritising student and staff safety while ensuring student learning under extreme uncertainty.

Many principals also showed the ability to act decisively when required. P6 explained the necessity to *"balance between control and democracy as decisive actions had to be taken immediately."* This meant that while participatory decision-making was encouraged pre-crisis, emergency conditions sometimes require quick decisions to safeguard the school community. Several principals described examples of adaptive decision-making. P6 *"co-teach with a teacher from the same subject area"* while P12 had to *"organise substitute arrangements for teachers based on who could travel safely to school on a given day."* This also includes adjusting weekly schedules according to security updates and Internet availability. Few principals chose to abandon standardised testing entirely in favour of basic skill reinforcement. P13 in Gaza explained, *"ignoring formal evaluation to encourage attendance and participation"* became necessary just to keep children engaged amid the chaos."

#### *Providing alternative mode of education*

All principals shared that, despite the instability caused by both the war, they remain committed to ensuring the continuity of education through a range of alternative modes. These modes are adjusted according to security conditions, the availability of school infrastructure,

teachers and resources. Remote and hybrid learning models were commonly used, although their usage depended on connectivity and devices. For instance, P5 highlighted the school *“focused on e-learning and preparing for emergencies.”* while P1 stated, *“sometimes you need to have in-person classes, sometimes suddenly you convert it to online classes.”* These accounts illustrate the need for flexible transitions between instructional modes. P9 developed *“an alternative plan that includes remote or partial education,”* combining online learning with face-to-face instruction whenever safe travel was possible.

In some schools, poor Internet connectivity or a lack of devices made remote learning challenging. Principals responded with informal solutions. For example, P13 in Gaza explained *“supporting learning through play by focusing on essential topics”* helped maintain engagement. Activities such as storytelling, games, and art were conducted to promote learning while minimising stress.

Few principals also prioritised core subjects such as mathematics, science and language to use limited instructional time effectively. In cases where school buildings were repurposed as shelters, principals organised group reading sessions and basic numeracy activities in any available space. The principals viewed these activities as essential as they provided psychosocial relief to children living under extreme stress.

#### *Prioritising staff and student well-being*

For many principals, the psychological well-being of students, staff and the wider school community was important. Principals felt their role is to foster resilience, morale and a sense of hope. P4 described responding *“from a humanitarian perspective, we show empathy and provide psychological and social support”* by making school rules more flexible to accommodate students’ emotional needs. P1 reflected, *“there was frustration and feeling of hopeless. I do try to support them in any way I can,”* while P7 viewed his role as *“instilling a spirit of hope”* to overcome the prevailing sense of despair. Similarly, P9 described providing *“psychological and social support to students and staff”* to address fear and anxiety among students and *“maintain morale and hope.”*

P11, leading an all-girls school, shared the need for *“increased attention to the psychological and emotional well-being of students and teachers,”* recognising that learning could not occur without emotional stability. P6 emphasised the importance of *“preventing severe psychological crises in children”* by creating a supportive school environment. Principals also ensured that teachers’ well-being were also taken care of by implementing many initiatives such as flexible workloads. P3 stressed, *“we are all in it together and people thrive on supporting each other in these situations including me.”*

#### *Community engagement*

Amid resource constraints, majority of principals drew extensively on their community networks to sustain school operations. Collaboration with local authorities and non-government organisations (NGOs) was a common strategy. P4 credited *“the local community’s support [and] guidance of the Directorate of Education”* in ensuring a rapid allocation of teaching materials. Similarly, P5 shared that *“support from the Nablus Municipality’ enabled repairs and the construction of temporary classrooms.”*

In-kind donations from NGOs were critical to meet their basic needs. P12 recounted receiving *“stationery, clothing, food, and water in emergencies”* from local businesses and charities. These collaborations supplemented school resources and boosted morale among staff and students. Additionally, collaborations with parents and municipal services brought in resources and moral support.

Mobilising volunteers emerged as an important strategy to address teacher shortages. For example, P3 contacted the local municipality and asked for *“a list of volunteers to teach lessons in place of the teachers who couldn’t reach the school.”*

Through these partnerships, principals showed engaging external partners and sustaining community relationships were just as vital as managing teaching and learning processes in schools. These efforts reinforced the school's position as a centre of hope and resilience.

Across the data, principals enacted a set of interrelated leadership strategies that prioritised adaptability, continuity of education, well-being and collective action. Adaptive leadership enabled principals to respond swiftly to changing security conditions, while alternative modes of education ensured that learning could continue despite infrastructural and access constraints. Simultaneously, prioritising psychosocial well-being and mobilising community support allowed schools to continue their function. Together, these strategies reveal how principals actively sustained schooling through endurance and care.

## Discussion

The scarcity of empirical studies on how school leadership is enacted under conditions of prolonged armed conflict, displacement and infrastructural destruction, particularly in the Palestinian context, has prompted the emergence of the current study. The findings illuminate several ways in which principals navigate educational leadership in contexts marked by sustained hardship, systemic disruption and ongoing uncertainty. First, unlike conventional notions of crisis leadership founded upon episodic disruption brought about by epidemics or natural catastrophes (Bellibaş *et al.*, 2026; Bush, 2023), Palestinian principals lead in an environment in which systemic interruption and institutional breakdown are a recurring reality (Arar *et al.*, 2025a). School leaders navigate ongoing insecurity while acting as educational leaders, crisis managers and moral support for their communities.

The findings extend Smith and Riley's (2012) crisis leadership model, which emphasises communication, trust and decisiveness. In conflict settings, communication takes on greater importance as a means of sustaining community morale and coordinating safety-sensitive schooling under rapidly changing conditions (e.g. closures, displacement, infrastructural damage, and interruptions to mobility and connectivity) under rapidly changing conditions. Most significantly, principals work with the knowledge that crises will recur, an understanding which echoes Oplatka's (2023) contention that leadership in war zones is intrinsically different from leadership in contexts characterised by peace and stability.

Second, given the persistence of ongoing military operations, principals are compelled to anticipate trauma rather than merely respond to it, building psychosocial awareness and relational care into the daily routines of schools. In this context, school leaders serve as a buffering agent for communities enduring ongoing war. Studies of school leadership in Syria and Ukraine (Abusamra *et al.*, 2023; Hudson *et al.*, 2024) describe similar reliance on improvisation, shared leadership, and collective coordination during times of war. However, the Palestine context is unique. Principals are tasked with the dual challenge of leading schools amid ongoing humanitarian crises while navigating the constraints that impact the education system.

The findings also highlight the inadequacy of prevailing models of leadership, such as instructional, transformational or managerial approaches, which often assume stability, neutrality and adequate resources. As Brooks and Jean-Marie (2007) contend, socially just leadership must move beyond these assumptions to address inequities and envision leadership within struggles for justice. Similarly, Shields (2010) argues that transformative leadership must address systemic exclusion. The Palestinian case exemplar renders these arguments starkly: leadership is not to be diminished into routine management tasks but, instead, needs to be grasped as a community-focused effort that supports educational continuity and social unity during ongoing wartime. In the circumstances where the basic needs are limited, the leadership priorities of principals change toward ensuring safety, shelter, food, psychological stability and necessities that render conventional instructional agendas impractical (Arar *et al.*, 2025b). This reframes the leadership task in a manner that is hardly theorised in conventional models.

Similarly, the findings extend [Salha and Affouneh's \(2023\)](#) conceptualisation of the “two aspects of leadership” in Palestine: one of formal and bureaucratic, the other of informal and relational. In wartime, the informal and relational dimension becomes central, as leadership practices emerge outside planned procedures to meet immediate and rapidly evolving needs. These include mobilising parent and community networks, liaising with NGOs and local communities to provide supplies, creating flexible timetables and alternative learning spaces when school buildings are damaged or inaccessible, maintaining communication through channels or avenues that remain open and coordinating psychosocial support to serve school communities.

### Implications

The findings of this study contribute to the growing scholarship on educational leadership. Specifically, the study demonstrates how adaptive, relational, moral and trauma-informed leadership are enacted simultaneously in a context affected by conflict, poverty and systemic constraints. Rather than operating as distinct leadership approaches, these practices converge as principals in Palestine continuously adapt decision-making, mobilise community networks and respond to the psychosocial needs of students and staff while sustaining schooling. This highlights the need for leadership theories to account for contexts in which crisis is not episodic but persistent.

The findings also have implications for leadership practice. The Palestinian principals went beyond administrative responsibilities. Their day-to-day practices, such as reopening schools under unsafe conditions, leveraging community support and providing psychosocial support, indicate leadership competencies that are not typically emphasised in traditional leadership models and therefore merit greater recognition. The findings highlight the value of equipping school leaders with skills in crisis responsiveness, trauma-informed leadership and community mobilisation through leadership preparation and professional development programs, particularly for those working in under-resourced or high-risk environments.

For research, the study highlights the importance of examining leadership within specific socio-political contexts. Much of the existing literature conceptualises crisis leadership as a temporary response to disruption. The Palestinian case illustrates how leadership is enacted in conditions of prolonged conflict and uncertainty, where sustaining schooling requires continuous adaptation.

In sum, the experiences of Palestinian's school leaders offer valuable insights into educational leadership under conditions of extreme adversity. Their practices contribute to the body of knowledge that can inform educational leadership in crisis-affected and under-resourced settings. Their voices should be recognised not only as examples of resilience but also as testimonies to the vital role school leaders play in maintaining education amidst systemic adversity. These accounts contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what school leadership truly entails.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are several limitations in this research. First, this research employed a qualitative approach to reveal the experiences and leadership strategies of school principals navigating the war in Palestine. In this regard, future research could explore the experiences of school principals in other conflict-affected contexts to develop a more solid crisis leadership framework for wartime. Such studies may also reveal the unique contextual nuances across countries as well as the differing crisis management practices. In addition, quantitative research will be useful to extend the present study's findings. For example, a crisis leadership scale could be a valuable addition to the leadership literature. Second, the findings from this study are limited to school principals' perspectives. Future studies could be done to triangulate the findings with inputs from other school stakeholders, such as teachers and parents.

## Conclusion

This research provides important insights into how educational leaders in Palestine sustain education and student well-being under extreme adversity, offering valuable implications for leadership practices in crisis contexts. The findings of this study contribute to the limited literature on behaviours, actions and practices of school principals during wartime that both describe and analyse how school leaders are dealing with the current situation and the strategies they employ to navigate and sustain schooling during times of crisis. It is important to build upon the findings from this study, especially in other regions of the world that are undergoing similar circumstances to determine the context-specificity of empirical findings (Huber and Helm, 2020).

## Dedication

This article is dedicated to the school principals, teachers, parents and students in Palestine, especially in Gaza, whose lives have been affected by the war. In honouring their resilience, courage and unwavering commitment to education amid unimaginable hardship, may we strive to build safer schools and communities in the face of future crises and conflicts.

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