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German Academia after October 7: Self-Censorship and Restrictions of Academic Freedom among MENA Scholars

Jannis Julien Grimm, Sven Chojnacki, Nina Moya Schreieder, Iman El Ghoubashy, Thaddäa Sixta

This study examines how scholars in Germany working on the Middle East have experienced the discussion of Israel and Palestine in research, teaching, and public debate since October 7, 2023. Drawing on a systematic online survey, it investigates across disciplines the perception of restrictions, practices of self-censorship, and perceived forms of institutional pressure. The findings indicate a marked intensification of political sensitivities shaping academic work and shifting boundaries of academic freedom. What becomes visible is a tension between respondents' normative ideal of open debate and their actual experience of narrowing discourse, contestation, and sanctioning. Self-censorship and experiences of threat are widespread. In this context, respondents emphasize the protection of plural expression as a central task of academic institutions. The results correspond to U.S. surveys conducted by the Middle East Scholar Barometer and, for the first time, provide systematic evidence for the German context.

Dr. Jannis Julien Grimm is the director of the Research Group "Radical Spaces" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Research (INTERACT) at Freie Universität Berlin and is the principal investigator of this study. Prof. Dr. Sven Chojnacki is the director of the research unit "Peace and Conflict Research" at the Otto-Suhr-Institute of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin. He is the speaker of the steering committee of the INTERACT centre. Nina Moya Schreieder is an associated researcher in the Research Group "Radical Spaces" and in charge of the statistical analyses in this survey. Iman El Ghoubashy and Thaddäa Sixta are research assistants in the INTERACT Research Group "Radical Space." Contact: radicalspaces@interact.fu-berlin.de / https://www.interact.fu-berlin.de/.

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Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft
Freie Universität Berlin
Ihnestraße 26 / 14195 Berlin, Germany
Web: www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/frieden

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Introduction

Research on violence and conflict in the Middle East is a core concern of peace and conflict studies, international relations, and area studies. Scholars in these fields provide important insights into the historicity of violence and the complex dynamics of conflict within and between Israel and Palestine. Yet, their work is also marked by heightened political sensitivities, public hostility, and at times significant constraints on academic freedom. Over recent months, mounting evidence has pointed to both self-censorship and perceived or actual restrictions.

Since the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military intervention in Gaza, these pressures have intensified considerably, as this survey makes clear from the perspective of the scholars themselves. In both Germany and the United States, universities have become flashpoints of heated public controversy: debates have focused on university leadership statements on the Gaza war, the political actions of student groups, the presence of antisemitism on campus, and the limits of acceptable pro-Palestinian expression. One perspective, however, has been largely absent—namely that of the researchers who teach and write about the Middle East on a daily basis and who are directly implicated in these debates.

This study addresses that gap. Drawing on a standardized online survey, it systematically captures the experiences and assessments of scholars working on the Middle East in Germany. In doing so, it also replicates, through several survey items, the *Middle East Scholar Barometer*, which has investigated similar questions in the U.S. context. The study asks, amongst others:

- How do academics perceive the polarization on campus since October 7?
- To what extent do they feel their freedom of speech and research is protected or restricted?
- How do they experience political disputes among their students?
- And what forms of self-censorship have emerged in the current climate?[1]

The goal of the study is to provide an empirical basis for understanding the extent and dynamics of self-censorship and perceived constraints on academic freedom in Germany. In doing so, it seeks not only to inform ongoing debates but also to highlight avenues for improving the working conditions of researchers in this field.

[1] Selbstzensur wird in dieser Studie operational verstanden als bewusste Zurückhaltung oder Modifikation wissenschaftlicher Äußerungen aufgrund antizipierter negativer Konsequenzen, unabhängig davon, ob diese Konsequenzen tatsächlich eintreten würden.

Previous Research

Questions of academic freedom and self-censorship have been systematically studied internationally for several years. Particularly influential in this regard are the surveys of the *Middle East Scholar Barometer* (MESB), coordinated by Shibley Telhami and Marc Lynch at the University of Maryland (Telhami and Lynch 2025). Their regular surveys of Middle East scholars in the United States and beyond reveal a clear pattern: a substantial proportion of respondents report feeling constrained in their teaching and research on Israel and Palestine. In the most recent volume of the survey (early 2025), around 76 percent stated that they felt the need to self-censor in a professional capacity—nearly 80 percent in the U.S. context. Criticism of Israel was seen as especially sensitive: 84 percent of those reporting self-censorship identified this as the area of greatest risk. The main reasons cited were pressure from external lobbying groups (56 percent), concerns about campus culture (44 percent), and disciplinary measures by university administrations (37 percent). These findings underscore that academic freedom is threatened not only by formal censorship but also by more subtle social, institutional, and political mechanisms (Grimm and Saliba 2017; Latif 2014; Cole 2017; Seeger et al. 2024). The Barometer also shows that, for many scholars, the period since October 7, 2023 represents "the worst or one of the worst" phases of their careers (Lynch 2025). More than 40 percent reported new institutional restrictions, such as tighter regulations on protests or speech guidelines, and a majority anticipated that these dynamics would intensify further under the current U.S. administration.

In Germany, debates around academic freedom have likewise gained traction (Mauthofer and Grimm 2025; Schäfer 2024; Hüther and Hüther 2023; Blumenthal and Ziegler 2025; Olbrisch 2025). A milestone was the publication of the first representative survey on academic freedom of expression in 2024 (Fabian et al. 2024), which surveyed over 9,000 scholars across disciplines and career stages. The results painted an ambivalent picture: nearly 80 percent assessed the overall state of autonomy and academic freedom positively. At the same time, a substantial share reported direct or indirect experiences of restrictions. Roughly 17 to 20 percent indicated that they did not feel free in their choice of research topics or in publishing results. In teaching, nearly one-quarter felt constrained in topic selection, and almost half perceived limits on the design of teaching formats. Constraints were reported most frequently in the humanities and social sciences, where respondents more often encountered substantive criticism, moral discrediting, or professional repercussions. Unlike the MESB, which centers on political sensitivities around the Middle East conflict, the German survey addressed a broader range of contentious topics—from antisemitism debates to ethically contested research. Nevertheless, parallels emerge: in both contexts, scholars expressed the expectation that addressing certain topics in teaching or research may entail negative consequences, leading them to adjust their behavior accordingly.

Another important empirical foundation for this study is the representative KAPAZ study conducted by the German Centre for Higher Education and Science Research, which for the first time systematically examined the scope and forms of hostility toward researchers in

Germany (Blümel and Just 2024). Based on a random sample of roughly 2,600 academics across career stages and disciplines, the study revealed that hostility toward science is widespread: nearly half of all respondents reported having personally experienced attacks. These ranged from comparatively mundane forms such as dismissive comments or questioning of scientific competence, to hate speech, silencing, threats, and, in rare cases, physical assaults. Incidents were reported most frequently in the humanities and social sciences, though the findings show that researchers across all disciplines and career stages can be affected. Notably, hostility does not stem exclusively from external actors but also from within the academic community itself. The study also demonstrates that such attacks have severe consequences for science communication and intra-academic exchange. Many respondents reported increased caution in public engagement, and some withdrew from debates altogether. KAPAZ thus confirmed the close link between experiences of hostility, perceptions of insufficient protective structures, and practices of self-censorship. At the same time, it pointed to institutional countermeasures: in addition to the nationwide SciComm-Support service, training programs, guidelines, and counseling services have been developed to strengthen researchers and make the academic system more resilient to attacks from both outside and within.

Taken together, these studies highlight that threats to academic freedom are multifaceted and emerge from different sources: politically sensitive research fields, structural restrictions within academia, and targeted attacks by external or internal actors. What has been lacking so far, however, is a systematic study that brings these dimensions together for the specifically German context of debates on Israel and Palestine. Previous research shows that work on highly politicized issues—such as climate change, vaccination, gender, or migration (Nogrady 2021; Grimes 2019; Nisbet et al. 2015; Goldenberg 2021; Väliverronen and Saikkonen 2021; Anderson and Huntington 2017; Samoilenko and Cook 2024; Rosenstock and Lee 2002; Grimm et al. 2020)—is disproportionately subject to hostility toward science. In Germany, questions concerning Israel and Palestine are uniquely charged with historical responsibility and political sensitivity (Marwecki 2020; Wiener 2024; Ullrich 2012). Findings from the U.S. context are therefore only partially transferable, while general studies such as KAPAZ remain too broad. It is precisely at this intersection that the present study intervenes: by systematically capturing the experiences of scholars in Germany who research and teach on Israel and Palestine, and who are therefore particularly exposed.

The tailored survey makes it possible to uncover the field-specific dynamics of self-censorship, perceived institutional pressure, and direct experiences of hostility within German higher education, thereby closing an important research gap. Moreover, it provides new insights into the largely underexplored effects of discourse narrowing, hostility and threats, and perceived restrictions on academic freedom on the everyday practices of teaching and research (Seeger et al. 2024; Dreißigacker et al. 2024; Wachs et al. 2022). As the present study demonstrates, self-censorship, experiences of threat, and constraints are not marginal phenomena among scholars in Germany whose work relates to political developments in the Middle East, but touch on the core of their academic practice.

Methodology

This study is based on a standardized survey of scholars working at German universities, non-university research institutes, and think and do-tanks. Its objective was to capture perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to the discussion of Israel/Palestine since October 7, 2023. The data were analyzed using quantitative-statistical methods; in addition, qualitative free-text responses were subjected to thematic analysis and contextual interpretation.

The target population of the survey was clearly defined: all scholars based in Germany with demonstrable expertise on the MENA region and/or Israel/Palestine. For this clearly delimited population, purposive sampling was the methodologically appropriate approach, since a random sample of "academia as a whole" would not have addressed the research questions. The sampling frame was constructed systematically from publicly accessible and verifiable sources, including institutional websites and relevant professional associations, and was reviewed internally for consistency. The sampling basis included, among others, membership lists of the German Middle East Studies Association (DAVO) as well as the official websites of academic institutions. In total, the web presences of 108 universities, 6 pedagogical universities, 16 theological colleges, 52 art schools, 210 universities of applied sciences and administrative colleges, 119 academic think tanks, and 36 think and do-tanks were consulted. This process made it possible to verify positions, research areas, and publications, thereby ensuring thematic relevance.

Eligibility criteria were strict: only individuals with at least a bachelor's degree and active scholarly engagement in research, teaching, or policy-oriented knowledge production were included. Students, research assistants, and project staff were only considered if they were employed as research associates or in comparable positions. The included disciplines represented a wide cross-section of German academia, spanning Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, political and social sciences, history, migration studies, media and communication studies, and peace and conflict research—provided that a demonstrable link to the MENA region or the Israel/Palestine conflict was present.

Beyond the university sector, non-university research institutes and think tanks were incorporated, since the focus of the study extended to the entirety of scholarship on Israel and Palestine in Germany. These institutions are central sites of knowledge production, policy advice, and public science communication in this field. At the same time, they are subject to different incentive and pressure structures, including stronger dependence on external funding and mandates, shorter project cycles, and higher media visibility—all factors that are relevant for the analysis of self-censorship, experiences of hostility, and institutional pressure. Their inclusion reduced the risk of a "campus bias," enhanced the external validity of the findings, and allowed for institutional comparison.

Thematic fit was strictly ensured: only individuals with at least a bachelor's degree, active scholarly involvement in research, teaching, or policy advice, and a verifiable

connection to the MENA region or Israel/Palestine were included. Validation of this expertise was carried out through official profile pages on institutional websites, which were used to check positions, titles, research areas, and publications. Individuals who had only participated once in a project on a MENA country but whose primary research focus lay elsewhere were excluded. The final pool of addresses was subjected to an internal review procedure to avoid duplicate entries and to guarantee consistency in identifying relevant expertise.

Implementation and Response Rate

The survey was conducted as an anonymous online questionnaire between early April and late May 2025. Participation was voluntary, and personalized survey links were distributed to prevent multiple entries. The estimated completion time was approximately 15 minutes. The questionnaire contained a total of 36 items, combining closed formats (scales, multiple choice) with open-ended questions. The overall response rate for the complete questionnaire averaged around 22 percent.[2] At the item level, response rates ranged from 41.7 to 95.2 percent. As expected, conditional items, questions located later in the survey, and those with extensive answer batteries registered lower response rates.

The average within-survey response rate was 70 percent, with a range of 41.7 to 95.2 percent. A progressive decline in response rates was observed over the course of the questionnaire, a common pattern in survey research attributable to fatigue effects. The section on knowledge and thematic relevance achieved the highest response rate at 91.4 percent, while the final block on demographic characteristics dropped to 65.6 percent. Section 4 (“Developments at Universities”) recorded the lowest overall rate at 54.6 percent; within this section, Question Q406 (“What measures has your university taken since October 7 and the beginning of the Gaza war?”) had the lowest response, at 41.7 percent.

The main reason for declining participation was the length and complexity of certain answer batteries, especially in Section 4 and Section 2 (“Discussion Culture”), some of which contained up to 19 answer categories and had a negative impact on response rates. By contrast, the introductory questions on disciplinary background were answered with particular consistency: Q101 (“In which of the following disciplines would you most likely situate yourself?”) and Q105 (“What is the basis of your expertise on Israel/Palestine?”) both achieved the highest item-level response rate of 95.2 percent.

[2] The response rate of 22 percent is in line with typical values for surveys on politically sensitive topics. Nevertheless, systematic biases cannot be ruled out, as it is possible that particularly sensitized or affected scholars participated disproportionately. The findings should therefore be understood as indicators of problematic developments whose generalizability requires further study.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences about the direction of observed relationships, but only about their covariation. Second, the findings are based on self-reports, which may be influenced by social desirability, strategic response behavior, or recall effects. Third, the operationalization of self-censorship is grounded in respondents' subjective perceptions. It therefore captures experiences of restraint, rather than necessarily observable behavior or institutionally documented interventions. Nevertheless, this subjective dimension is central for assessing the climate of debate and perceived room for maneuver. Fourth, possible selection mechanisms must be taken into account: given the topic-specific sampling strategy and the moderate response rate, there may be an overrepresentation of individuals who felt particularly affected and were therefore more likely to participate. This could lead to an overestimation of the prevalence of certain experiences if less affected individuals were less inclined to consider participation necessary.

At the same time, feedback from the field suggests that highly exposed individuals may have disproportionately refrained from participation out of concern about re-identifiability in small disciplines, specific career stages, or particular institutions. Some scholars may have feared that their responses, despite anonymization, could be indirectly attributed to them in such contexts and might result in professional sanctioning. Both processes—greater participation by those particularly affected and non-participation by those especially exposed—may work in opposite directions, leaving the direction of any potential bias indeterminate. In addition, item non-response and varying levels of accessibility across institutional subpopulations may further influence the results. For this reason, absolute levels must be interpreted with caution, while the robustness of patterns across disciplines, career stages, and institutional settings is of particular relevance.

The consistency of response behavior observed in the data and the high degree of substantive convergence with external reference studies—such as the *Middle East Scholar Barometer* in the U.S. and the KAPAZ study on hostility toward scholars in Germany—strengthen both construct and external validity (cf. Telhami and Lynch 2025; Blümel and Just 2024; Fabian et al. 2024). This suggests that the central patterns identified cannot be explained solely by selective participation, even if absolute levels are best interpreted as conservative estimates. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of positions expressed on politically contentious items, as well as the replicability of the main effects in subgroup analyses, argue against the possibility that the survey results are skewed by an activist pre-selection of respondents.

Findings

Respondents represent a wide disciplinary spectrum, with the largest groups working in Arabic and Islamic Studies,[3] cultural studies, area studies, and political science. The majority are engaged in research (85 percent), with more than half also involved in teaching (56 percent). Nearly three-quarters of respondents are affiliated with universities.[4]

Sociodemographically, the sample consists primarily of postdoctoral researchers (25 percent), professors (20 percent), and doctoral candidates (18 percent), with most positions funded through public sources (69 percent). The connection of respondents to Israel/Palestine is primarily scholarly (83 percent) or political in nature (80 percent). Many also report personal ties to the region, such as family, friends, or acquaintances (46 percent in Israel, 43 percent in Palestine). In addition, 40 percent of respondents cite Germany's historical responsibility as their primary reason for engagement with the topic. Family background plays no role for a majority (59 percent), but shapes solidarity positions for a substantial minority: about one-quarter report that their family history influences their solidarity with Palestinians (27 percent) or with Israelis (25 percent).

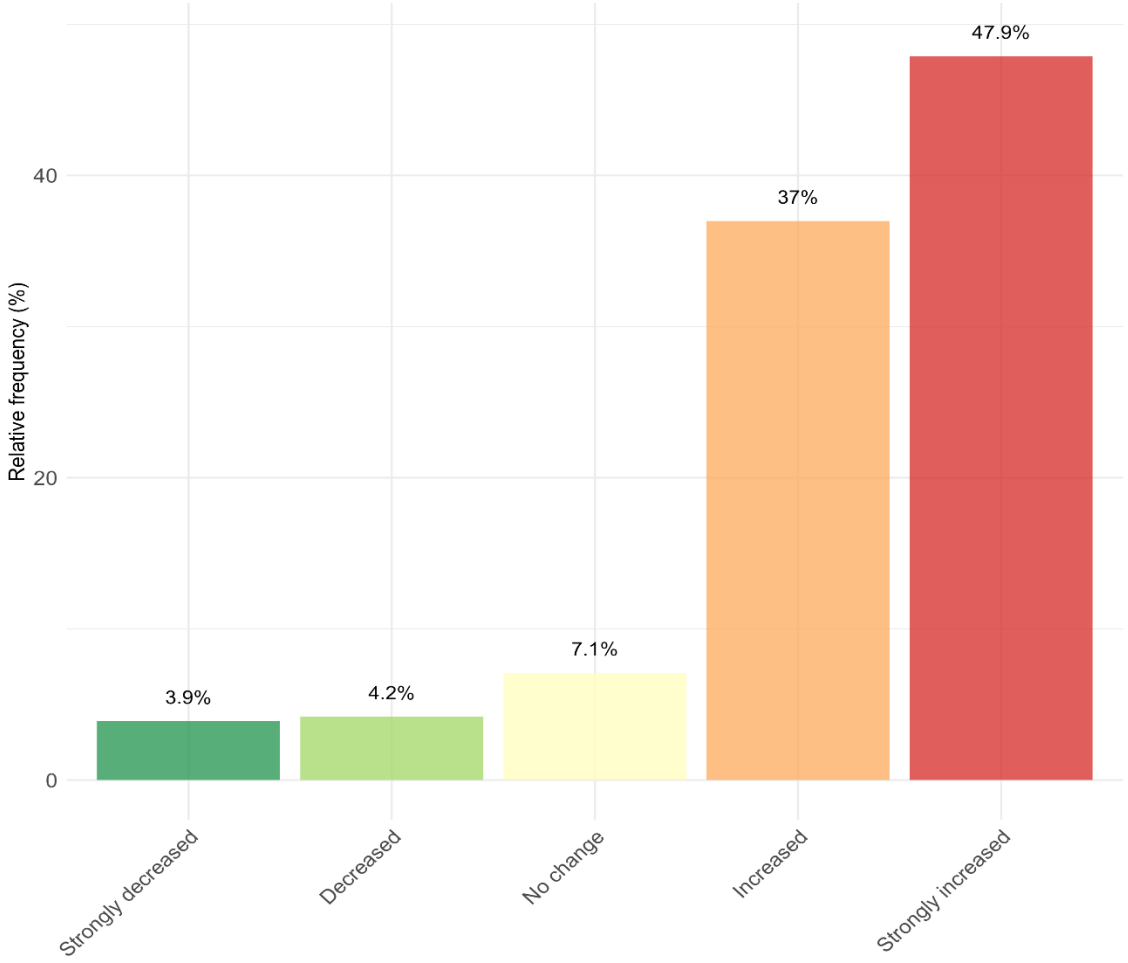
Perceived Threats to Academic Freedom

The analysis of ordinal variables provides a detailed picture of the academic climate in Germany since October 7, 2023. The data reveal significant trends in how respondents perceive debates, institutional pressure, and the need for self-censorship. A central and striking finding concerns the markedly altered sense of threat to academic freedom. An overwhelming majority of participants report a deterioration: 47.9 percent state that the threat has "increased significantly." An additional 37 percent report that it has "increased."

The findings suggest that concerns about restrictions on academic freedom are not a niche phenomenon but a widely shared sentiment within German academia. The differences lie primarily in the perceived degree of deterioration. Postdoctoral researchers report feeling the most threatened: 90.5 percent state that the sense of threat has increased, including 58.1 percent who perceive it as having "increased significantly"—the highest rate of any group—and 32.4 percent who see it as having "increased." This heightened concern may reflect the precarious stage of their careers, in which reputation, publications, and external funding are particularly decisive. Among (junior) professors, anxiety is also substantial: 81.2 percent perceive an increase in threats to academic freedom. Interestingly, this figure is split evenly, with 40.6 percent reporting that the threat has "increased" and another 40.6 percent that it has "increased significantly." Despite their comparatively secure positions, professors too report, by a clear majority, feeling their academic freedom to be under pressure.

[3] This includes scholarship typically categorized as Middle East Studies in anglophone contexts.
[4] For ease of presentation, certain categories were consolidated: *Peace and Conflict Studies* and *Security Studies* were merged into a single category; *Research on Antisemitism* and *Jewish Studies* were combined under *Jewish Studies and Antisemitism Research*.

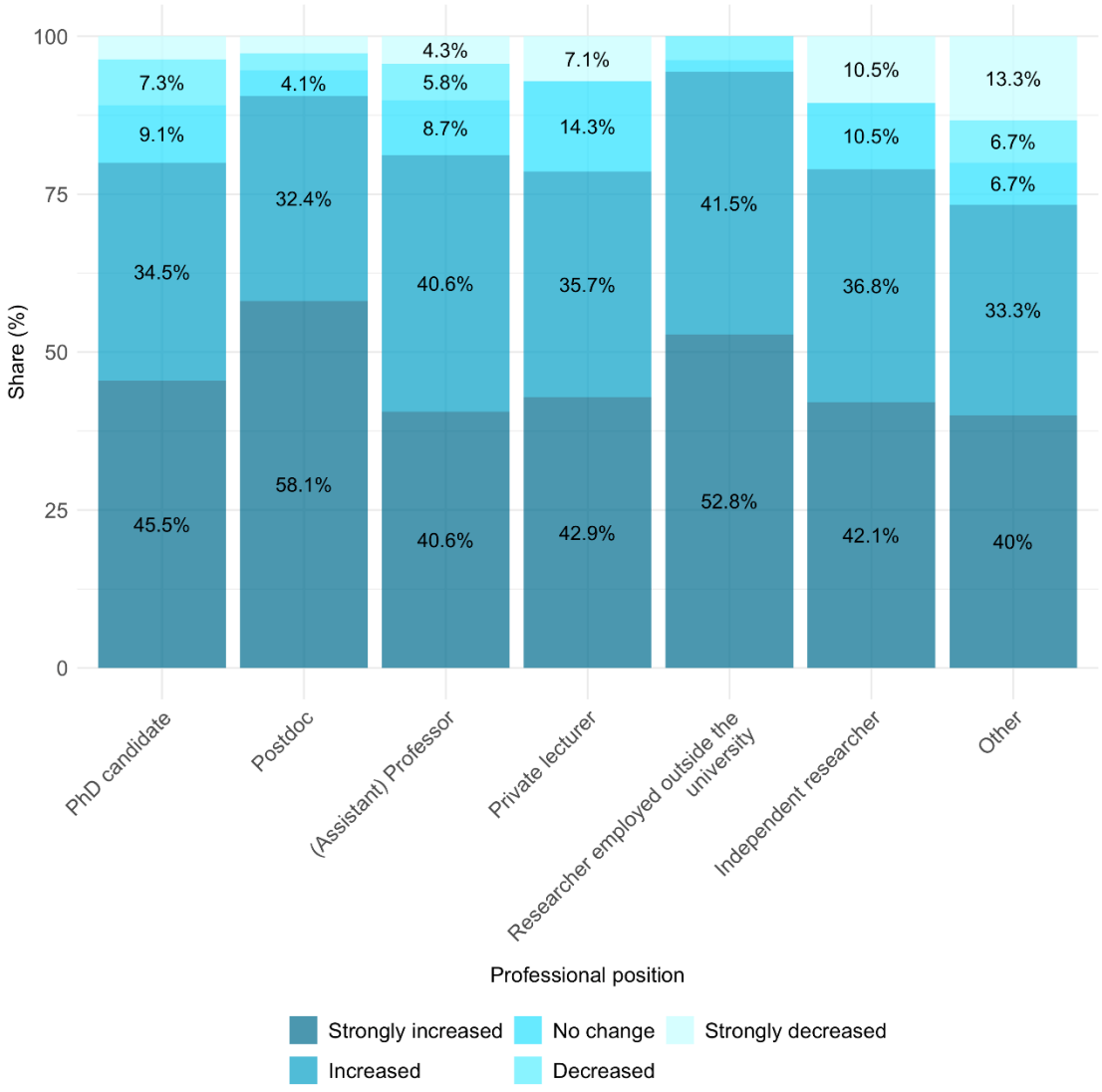
Figure 1: q403 - In your opinion, how has the threat to academic freedom changed in the context of 7 October 2023 and the Gaza war?



Doctoral candidates, at the very beginning of their academic careers, also view the situation as deeply troubling. Overall, 80.0 percent of this group perceive an increase in threats to academic freedom, divided into 45.5 percent who see it as having "increased significantly" and 34.5 percent who view it as having "increased." This indicates that the sense of pressure is already strongly felt among the youngest members of the academic community.

A similar pattern emerges among *Privatdozent*innen* (postdoctoral lecturers with habilitation) and independent scholars. Among the former, 78.6 percent perceive an increase (42.9 percent "increased significantly," 35.7 percent "increased"), while among independent scholars the figure is 78.9 percent (42.1 percent "increased significantly," 36.8 percent "increased"). These results suggest that insecure or unconventional employment arrangements are closely associated with heightened sensitivity to restrictions on academic freedom.

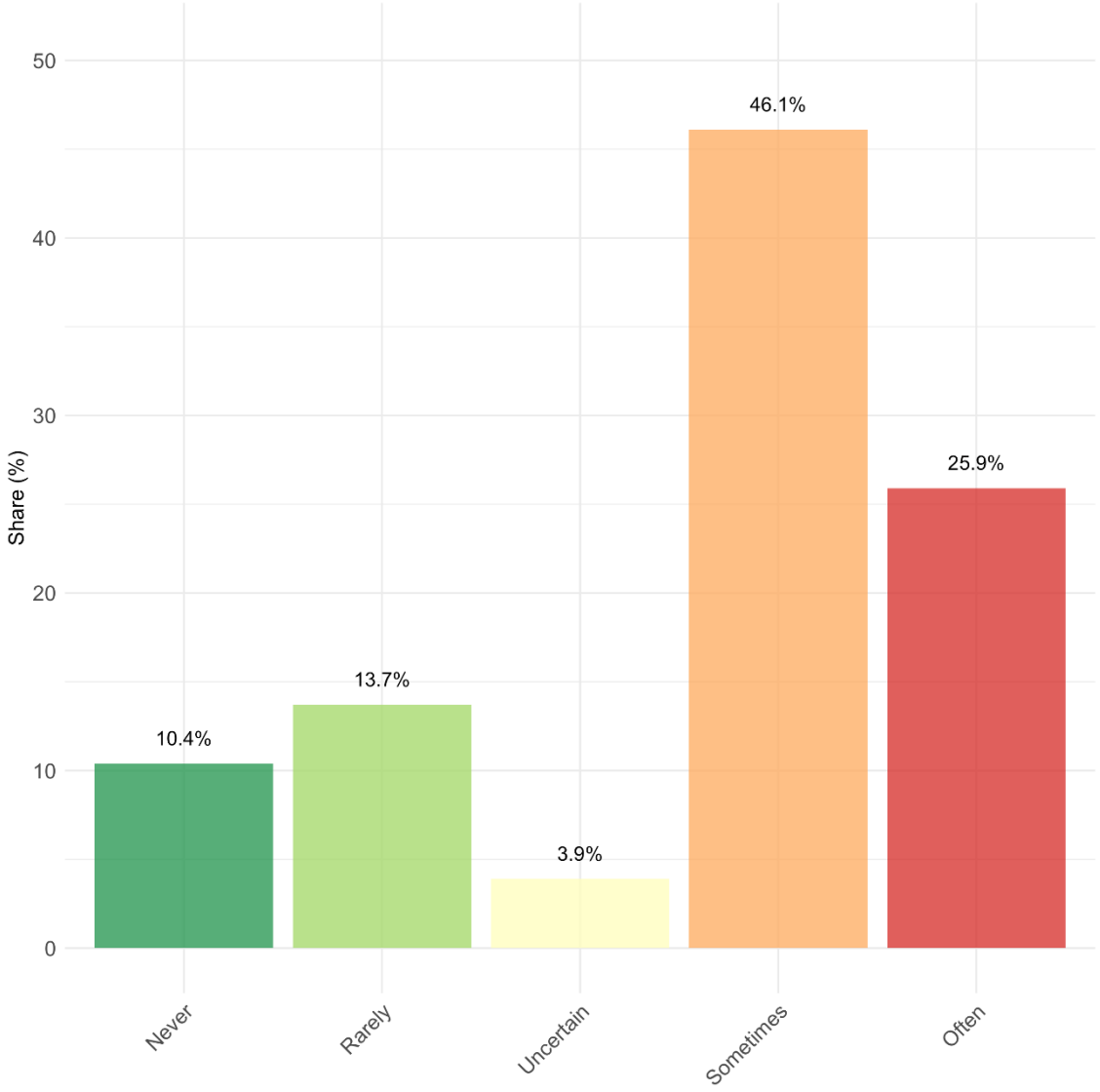
Figure 2: q403 (Academic freedom) x q503 (Professional position)



Strong Self-Censorship

The data demonstrate a statistical association between the perception of intensified attacks and individual experiences of restriction. Whether perceptions amplify experiences or vice versa cannot be determined with the present study design. What is clear, however, is that self-censorship is a widespread phenomenon. A total of 25.9 percent of respondents report that they “often” feel unable to express their views freely, while another 46.1 percent state that they at least sometimes feel the need to censor themselves.

Figure 3: q302 - Do you feel the need to self-censor when addressing Israel/Palestine?



More than three-quarters of respondents report exercising particular restraint when it comes to Israel-related topics (76 percent). In addition, many state that they censor themselves when addressing German foreign policy toward Israel/Palestine. With regard to the contexts in which self-censorship is felt most strongly, respondents most often name public events (81 percent), media contributions (54 percent), and their own faculty or departmental colleagues (42 percent). The primary reasons cited are fear of being misunderstood (63 percent), fear of public hostility (60 percent), and concern about possible professional consequences (60 percent).

Figure 4: q306 - What are your reasons for restricting your statements about Israel/Palestine? [Multiple choice]

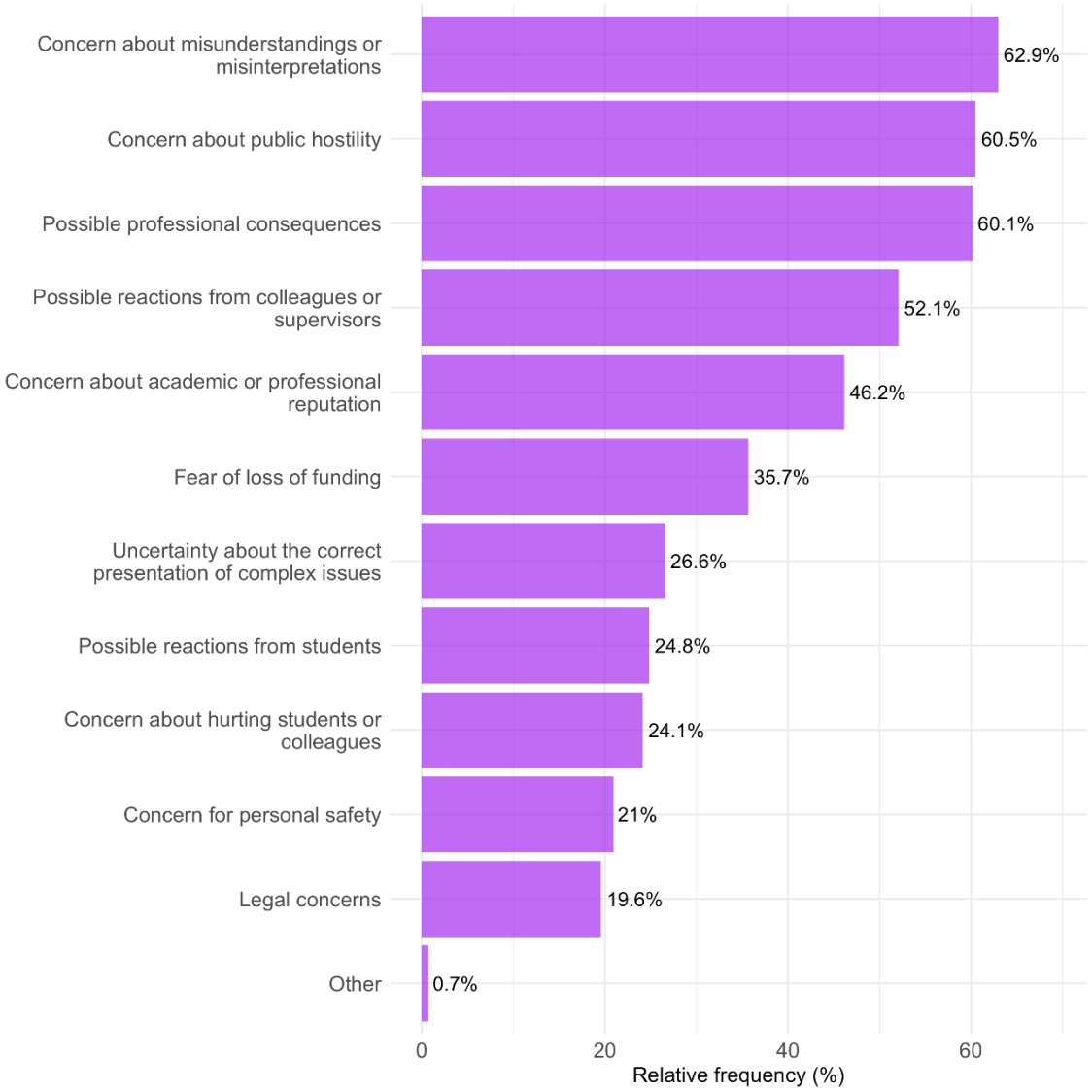
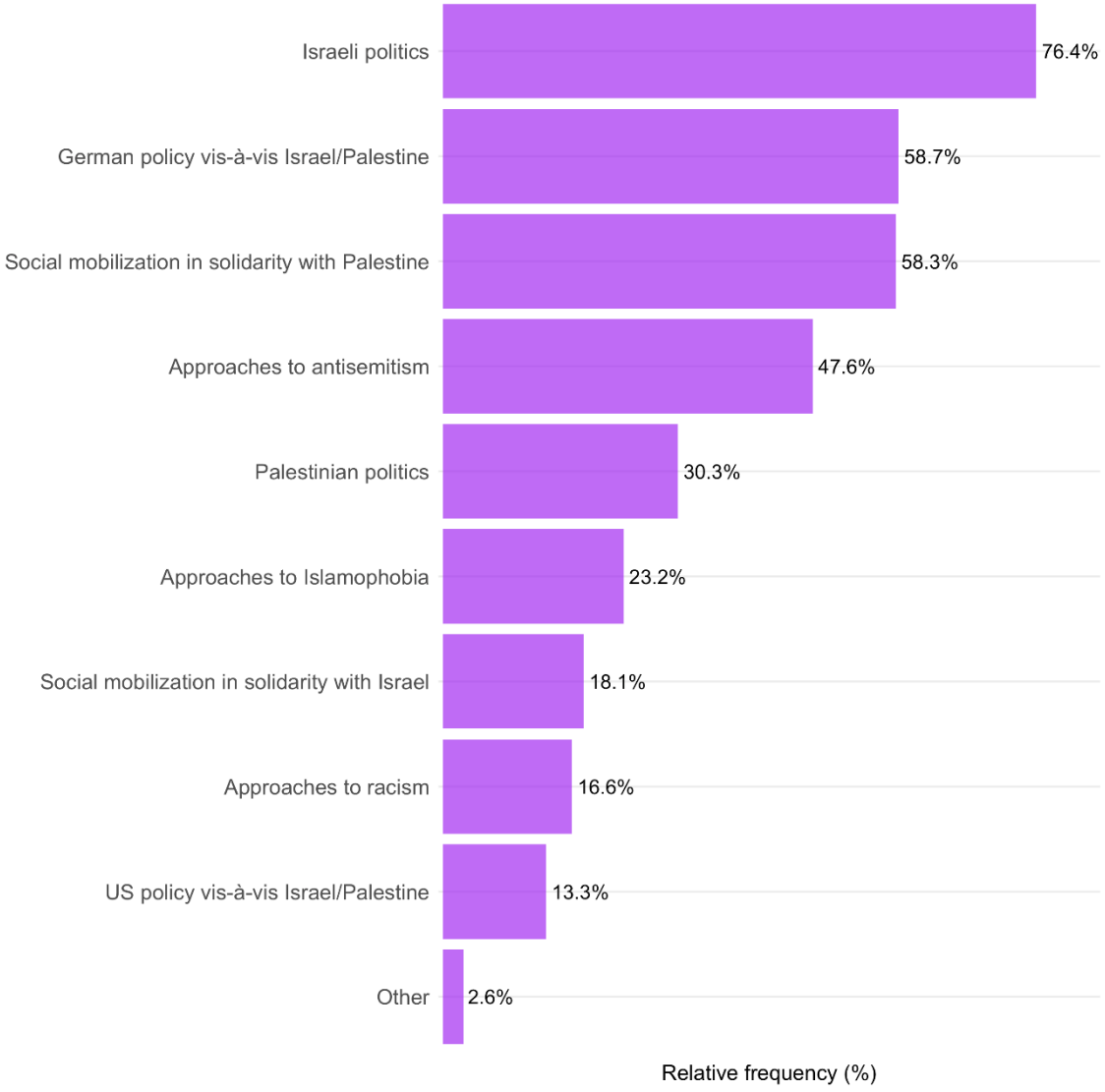


Figure 5: q304 - On which topic do you most strongly feel the need to selfcensor? [Multiple choice]

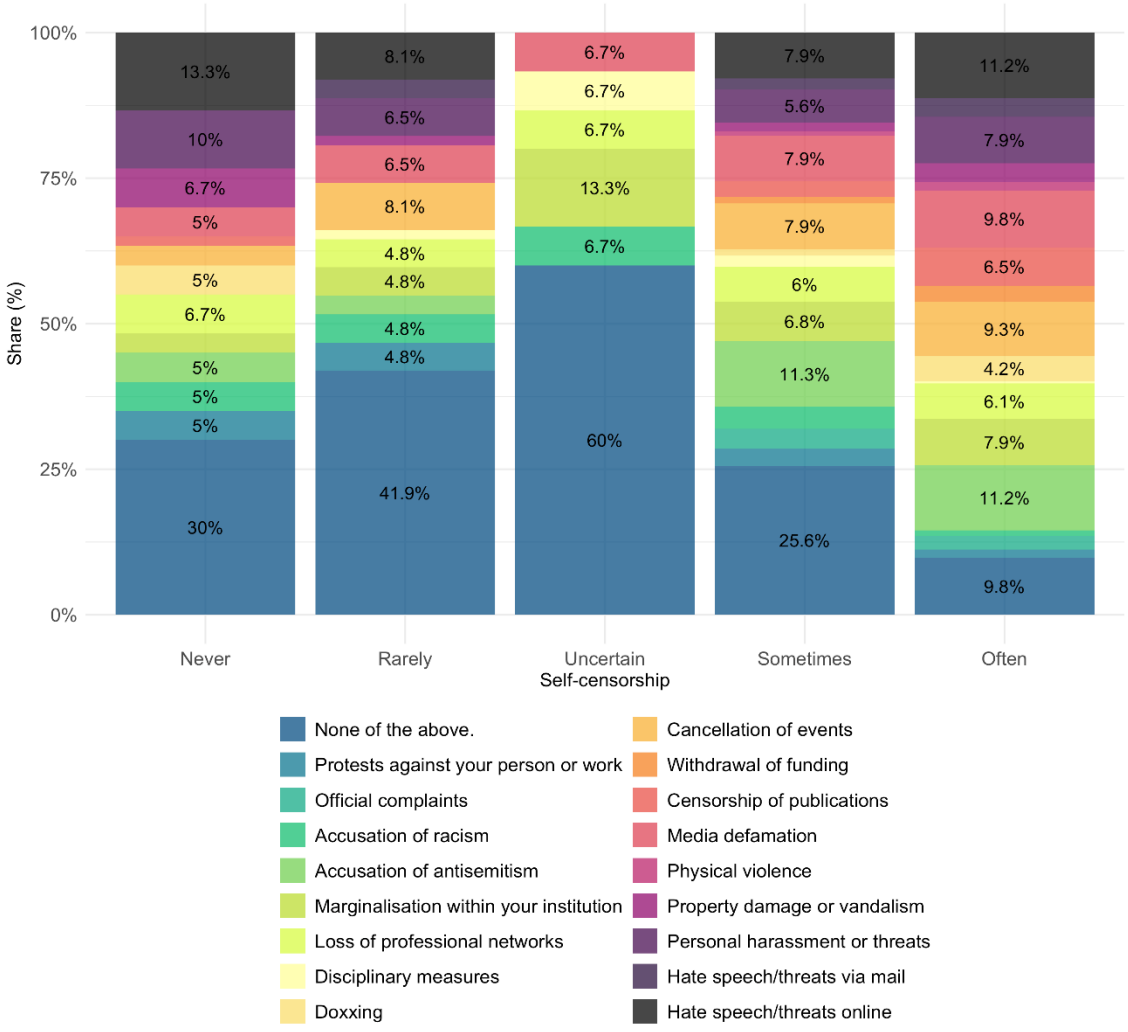


Self-Censorship and Personal Experiences

The data indicate a clear association between the extent of perceived self-censorship and the frequency of negative experiences. Respondents who report censoring themselves "often" or "sometimes" also report significantly more frequent instances of hostility and professional disadvantages. This is particularly evident in the case of serious accusations and attacks. Among those who "sometimes" self-censor, 11.3 percent had faced accusations of antisemitism; among those who "often" do so, the figure was 11.2 percent.

A similar pattern emerges with online hate speech or threats, reported by 7.9 percent of those who "sometimes" and 11.2 percent of those who "often" self-censor. Exclusion from events was likewise disproportionately common in these groups (7.9 percent among those who "sometimes" and 9.3 percent among those who "often" self-censor). These figures suggest that the impulse to self-censor is not merely an abstract concern but correlates with concrete or observed negative experiences.

Figure 6: q302 (Self-censorship) x q307 (Phenomena)

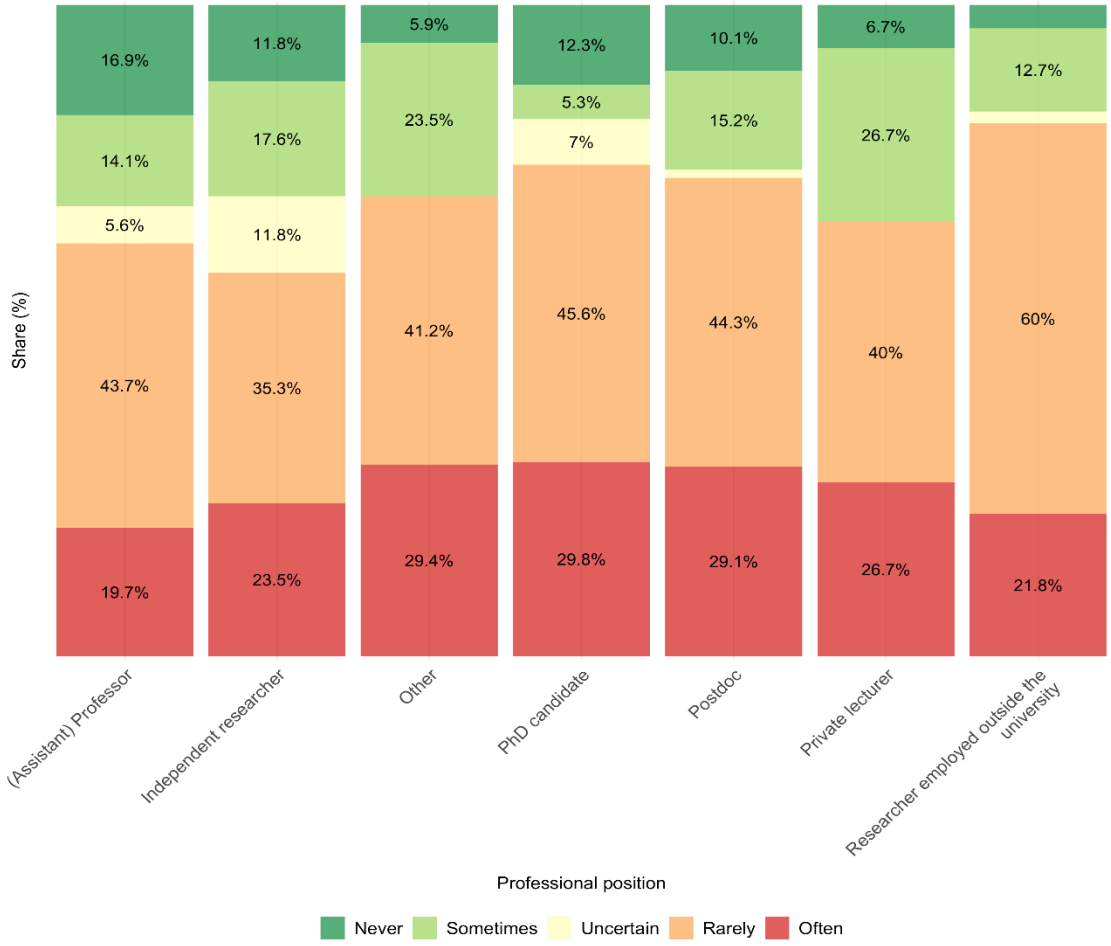


Status and Self-Censorship

The analysis reveals marked differences in experiences of self-censorship across academic hierarchies. Scholars in the early stages of their careers report particularly high pressure to control their positioning. Among doctoral candidates, 46 percent state that they "sometimes" censor themselves, and nearly 30 percent report doing so "often." Comparable figures are found among postdoctoral researchers (44 percent sometimes, 29 percent often).

By contrast, professors exhibit somewhat different patterns. While 44 percent also report occasional self-censorship, only 16 percent indicate that they censor themselves "often." At the same time, professors show the highest proportion of respondents who report never engaging in self-censorship (18 percent). Permanent researchers outside of universities stand out with especially high levels of self-censorship: 60 percent state that they censor themselves "sometimes," and a further 22 percent "often." This is the highest combined share across the entire sample.

Figure 7: q302 (Self-censorship) x q503 (Professional position)



The reasons for self-censorship vary considerably across academic status groups. Doctoral candidates (70 percent) and postdoctoral researchers (67 percent) most often report holding back out of concern for potential professional consequences. For these groups, fear of losing funding also plays a central role. Concern about negative career repercussions thus emerges as a key driver of self-censorship, particularly for scholars in precarious employment. This concern is most pronounced among doctoral candidates, 70.0 percent of whom cite it as a reason, followed closely by independent scholars (69.2 percent) and postdocs (67.1 percent). By contrast, (junior) professors name this reason less frequently, though still at a notable level of 44.8 percent.

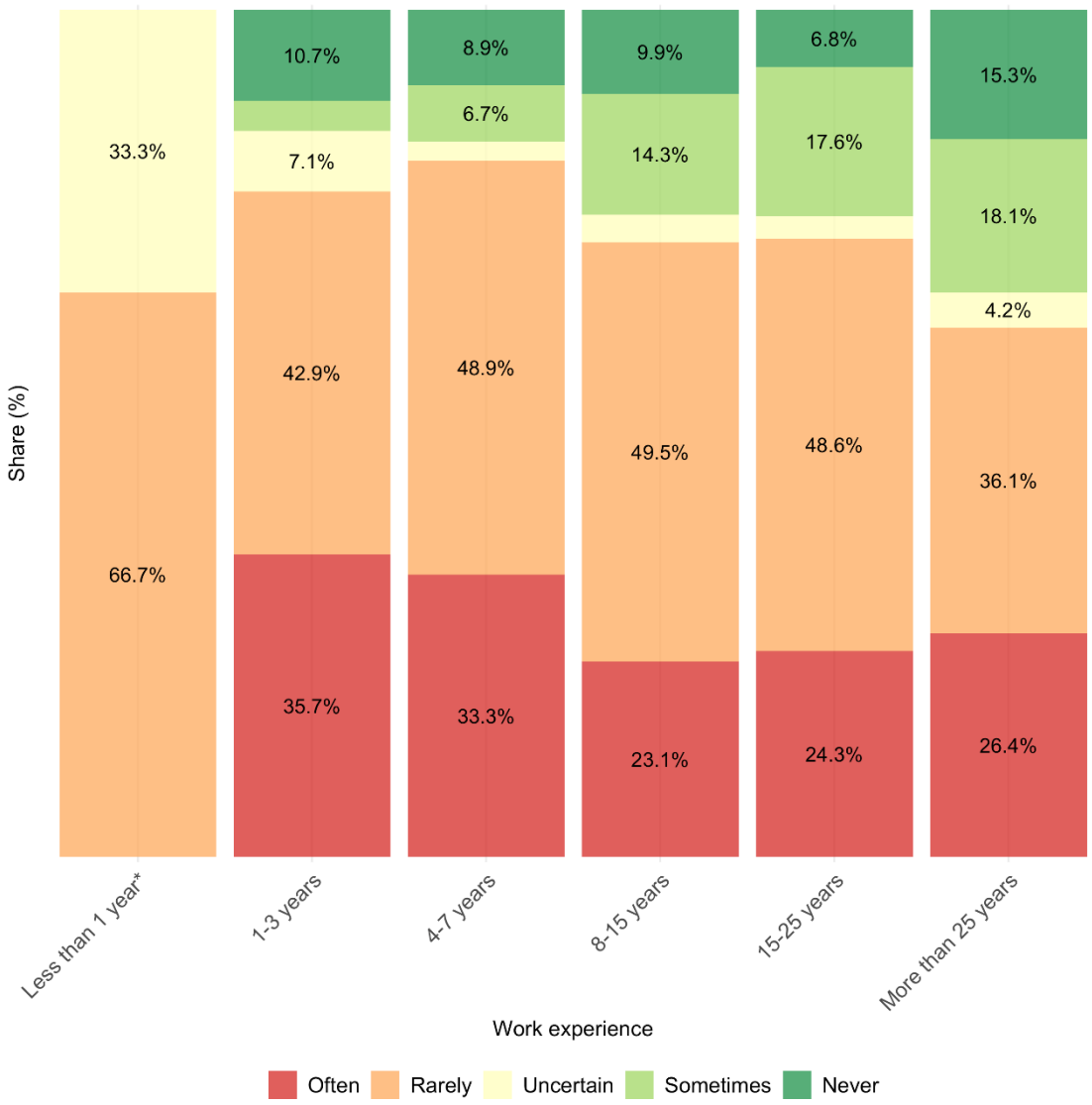
This suggests that more secure positions and greater autonomy reduce—but by no means eliminate—the fear of direct professional disadvantages. Among professors and privately employed lecturers, other factors come to the fore: here, concerns about personal reputation or the risk of public hostility are cited more often as reasons for self-censorship.

Fear of losing or not obtaining research funding is another significant factor, particularly affecting those whose employment and research depend heavily on external grants. Independent scholars express this concern most frequently, with more than half (53.8 percent) citing it as a reason for restraint. Postdocs, whose positions are often project-funded, also report this at above-average levels (41.4 percent). Among doctoral candidates (32.0 percent) and (junior) professors (32.8 percent), the share is somewhat lower but still notable. The lowest value is found among Privatdozenten (7.1 percent), suggesting a different form of integration into the academic system.

Taken together, the picture is consistent: the more precarious and dependent the employment situation, the stronger the perceived need for self-censorship and the greater the perceived threat to academic freedom. Professors, who already hold status and reputation, report less frequent self-censorship and face fewer existential risks. Yet when combining the categories “often” and “sometimes,” the pressure is highest among permanent researchers in non-university institutions (81.8 percent) and doctoral candidates (75.4 percent). Postdocs also experience substantial pressure, with a combined share of 73.4 percent. (Junior) professors are least likely to report frequent self-censorship (19.7 percent), but even in this group a considerable proportion acknowledge sometimes feeling the need to restrict their statements (43.7 percent). This again suggests that perceived pressure rises with increasing visibility and responsibility in the academic field.

An instructive finding is that the inclination toward self-censorship increases steadily with the length of academic experience, only to decline again after many years in the profession. Among scholars with less than one year of professional experience, 66.7 percent already report censoring themselves at least “sometimes.” This share rises to 78.6 percent among those with 1–3 years of experience. The highest level of self-censorship is found among respondents with 4–7 years of experience: 82.2 percent in this group report self-censoring, including 48.9 percent “sometimes” and 33.3 percent “often.” Only after this stage does the proportion begin to decline again.

Figure 8: q302 (Self-censorship) x q504 (How long have you been active in academia?)[5]

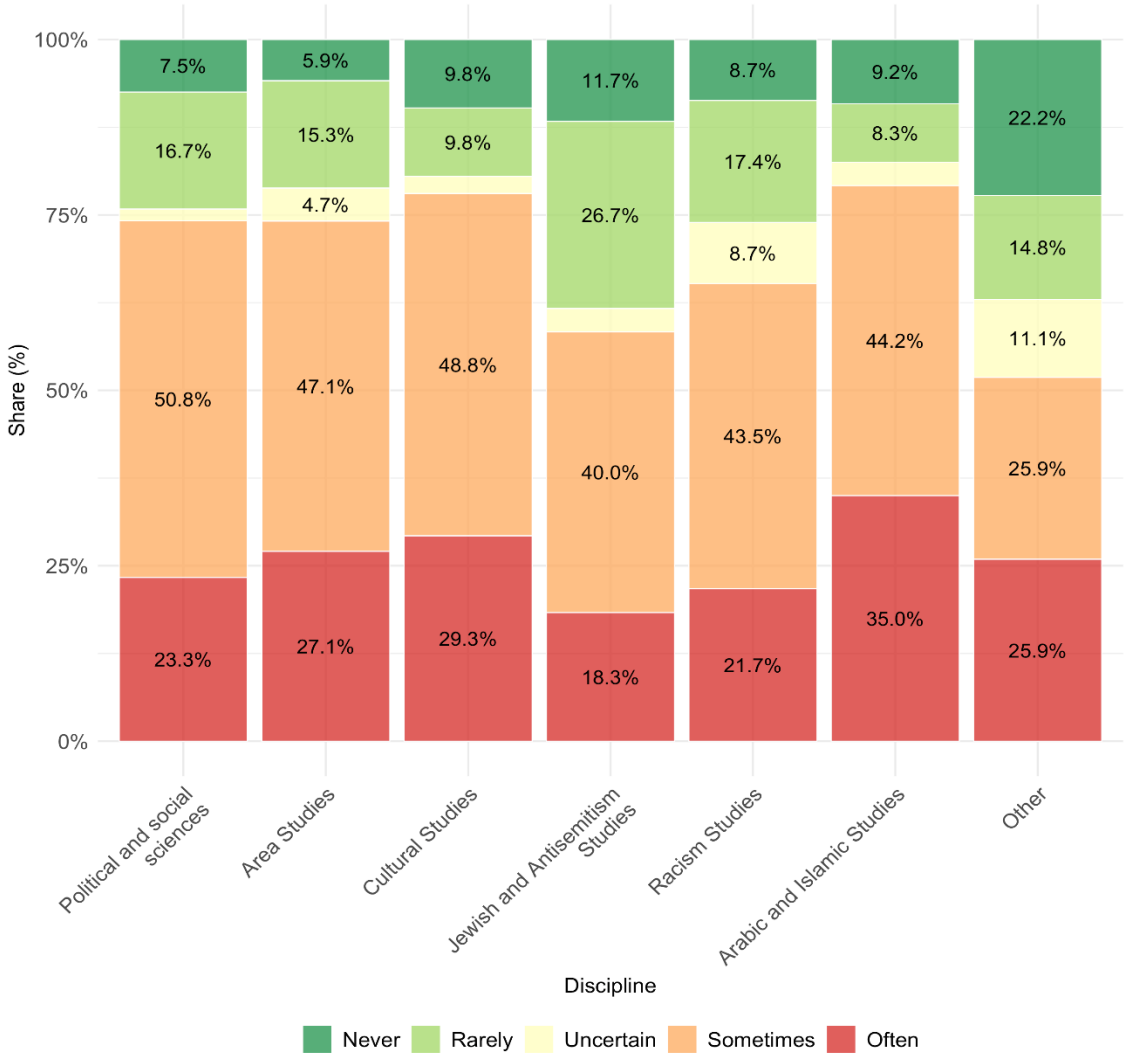


[5] Groups with fewer than 10 cases are marked with an asterisk (*) in all figures and should be interpreted with caution.

Personal Ties and Self-Censorship

The study also examined whether respondents' connection to Israel/Palestine—whether scholarly, political, or familial, or whether no specific connection exists—correlates with the extent of self-censorship. The results show a clear differentiation: respondents without a particular connection predominantly reported either "never" (60 percent) or only "sometimes" (40 percent) censoring themselves. By contrast, all respondents with a specific connection to Israel or Palestine stated that they censor themselves "sometimes" or "often." This effect is especially pronounced among those with personal ties to Palestine: 36 percent of respondents with family or friends there reported censoring themselves "often."

Figure 9: q105 (Connection to Israel/Palestine) x q302 (Self-censorship)

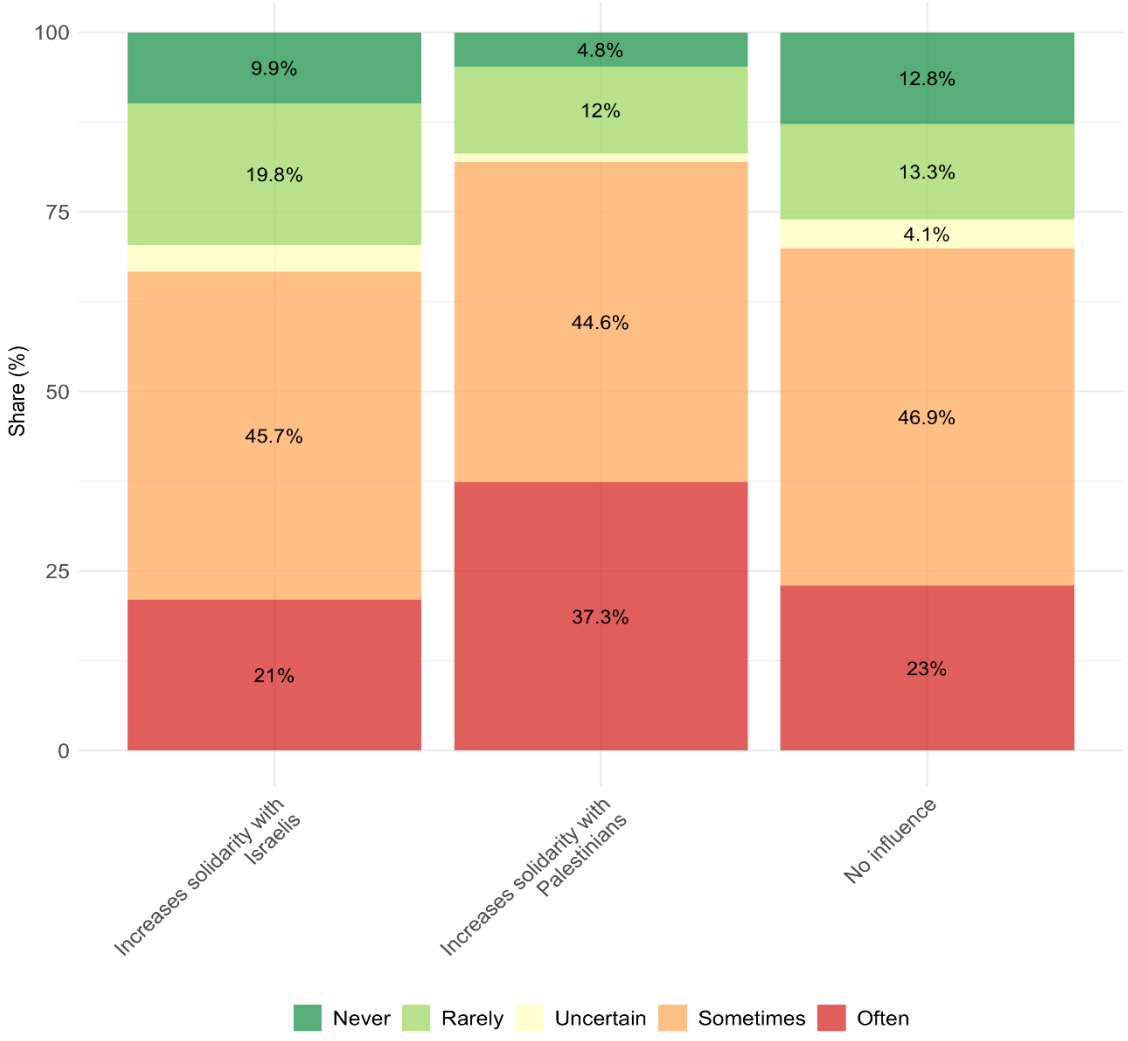


Family Background and Self-Censorship

In a next step, we examined whether respondents' family background (q106) influences their self-censorship (q302)—that is, the extent to which they feel the need to censor themselves when addressing the topic of Israel/Palestine. Among respondents who reported that their family background has little impact on their position, the majority stated that they censor themselves "sometimes" (47 percent) or "often" (23 percent). A similar distribution is found among those who see continuity between their family background and solidarity with Israelis.

Striking differences appear, however, among respondents who attribute their solidarity with Palestinians to their family background. In this group, substantially more respondents reported censoring themselves "often" (37 percent) or "sometimes" (45 percent). Nearly four-fifths of this group thus expressed a need for self-censorship, while only 4.8 percent stated that they "never" censor themselves.

Figure 10: q302 (Self-censorship) x q106 (Family history)

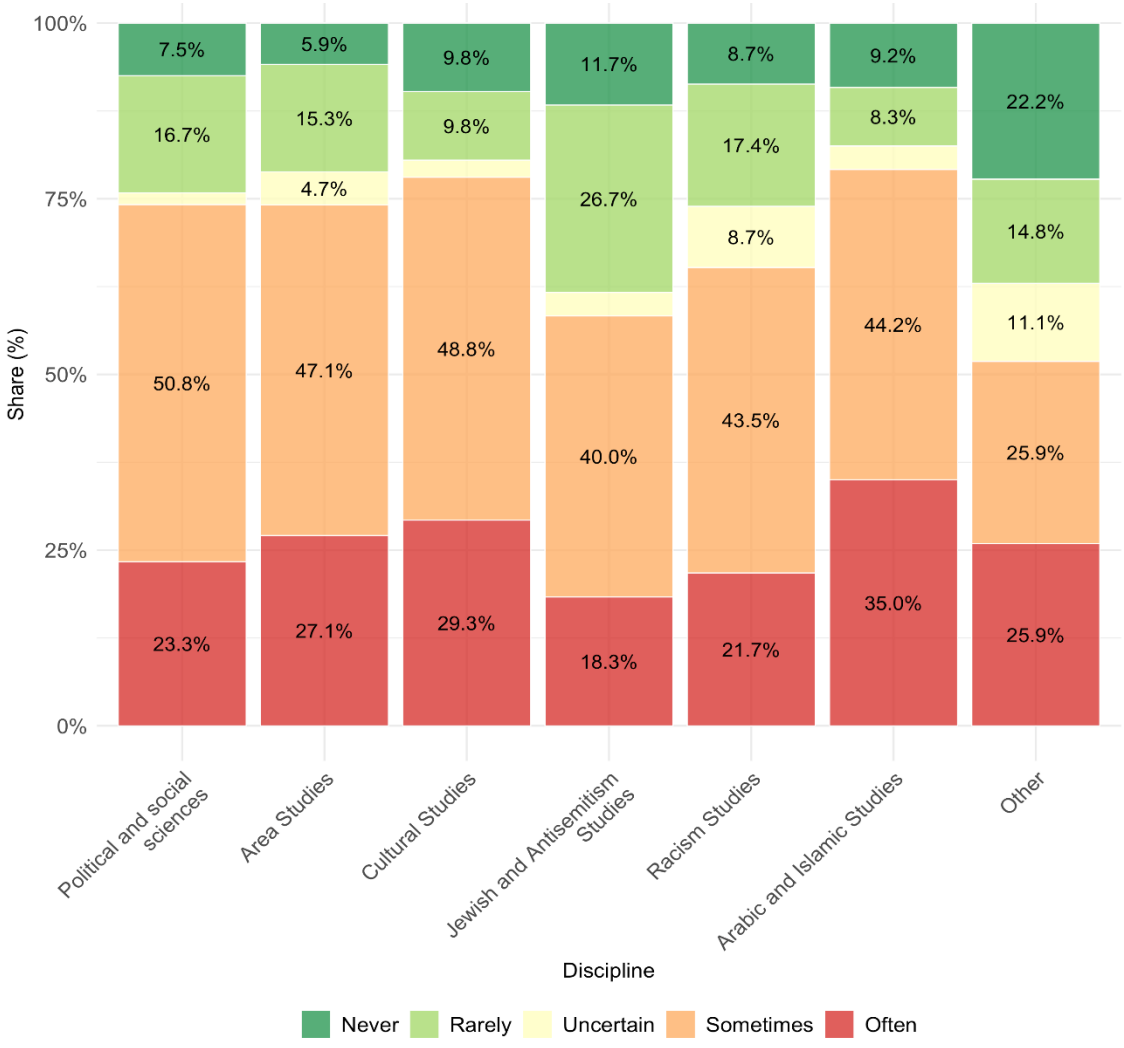


Disciplinary Differences in Self-Censorship

The analysis of self-censorship related to the discussion of Israel/Palestine reveals expected differences across disciplines. The highest proportion of respondents who report censoring themselves "often" is found in Arabic and Islamic Studies (35.0 percent). In addition, 44.2 percent in this field state that they censor themselves "sometimes," meaning that a total of 79.2 percent report some degree of self-censorship. A similarly high level is observed in cultural studies, where 78.1 percent report engaging in self-censorship.

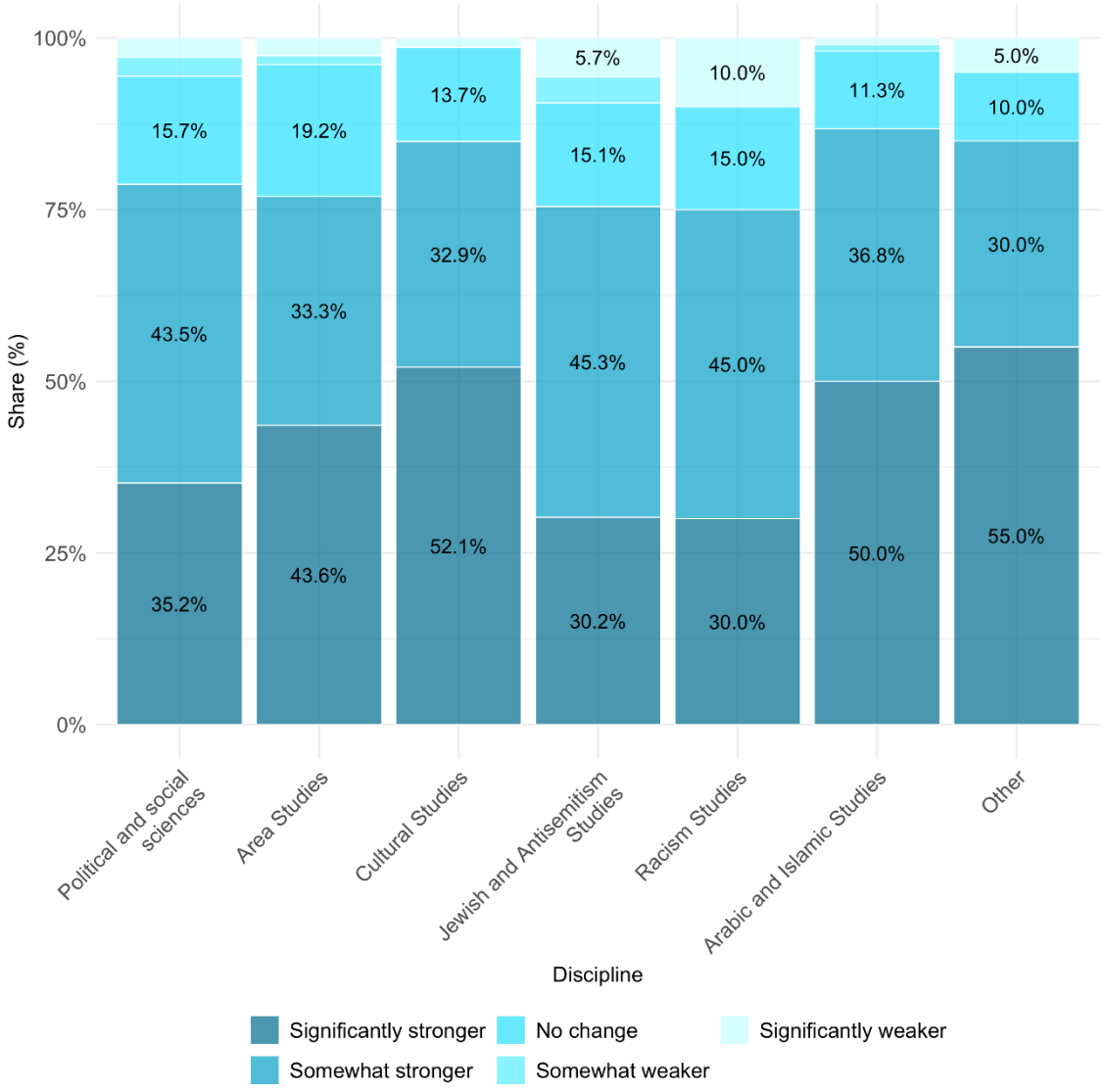
In the political and social sciences, nearly three-quarters of respondents also report self-censorship (23.3 percent "often" and 50.8 percent "sometimes"). In Jewish Studies and research on antisemitism, by contrast, the share of those who rarely or never feel the need to self-censor is noticeably higher at 38.4 percent. Yet even in this field, an absolute majority of 58.3 percent report a need to censor themselves.

Figure 11: q101 (Disciplines) x q302 (Self-censorship)



By contrast, disciplinary differences are less pronounced when it comes to how self-censorship has developed since October 7, 2023. Across all fields, an overwhelming majority of respondents report a stronger or much stronger inclination to self-censor. In cultural studies, 85.0 percent state that their need for self-censorship has increased (52.1 percent "much stronger" and 32.9 percent "somewhat stronger"). In Arabic and Islamic Studies, the figure is even higher, at 86.8 percent (50.0 percent "much stronger" and 36.8 percent "somewhat stronger"). Even in Jewish Studies and antisemitism research, where the overall level is somewhat lower by comparison, 75.5 percent report an increase (30.2 percent "much stronger" and 45.3 percent "somewhat stronger"). In every discipline examined, only a small minority indicate that their inclination to self-censor has remained unchanged or become weaker.

Figure 12: q101 (Disciplines) x q303 (Self-censorship trend since October 7)

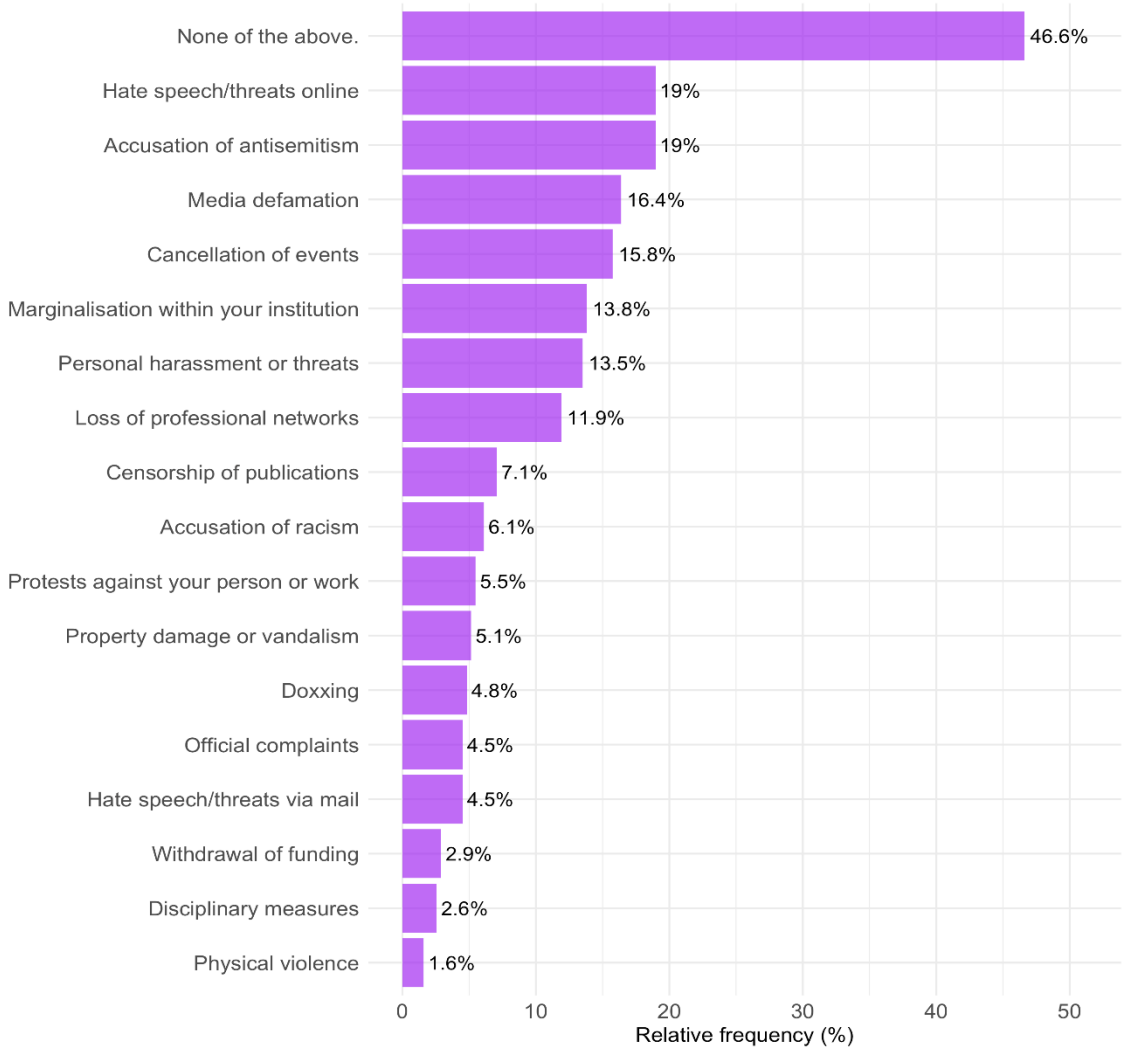


Perceived Institutional Pressure and Experiences of Threat

Respondents' reported need for self-censorship can in part be explained by a perceived rise in institutional pressure. In this study, institutional pressure is understood as perceived or actual expectations from one's institution to avoid or privilege certain positions. More than half of participants (50.7 percent) perceive a "significant" (26.9 percent) or "somewhat" (23.8 percent) increase in pressure to avoid the topic of Israel/Palestine within their institution (university, research institute, or think tank). By contrast, only 27.8 percent report an increase in pressure to speak out. The dominant tendency thus clearly points toward silence and restraint.

This development stands in stark contrast to respondents' general attitudes. The statement that universities should protect freedom of expression received near-unanimous agreement, with an average score of 4.80 on a 5-point scale.

Figure 13: q307 - Have you been affected by the following phenomena since 7 October 2023 due to your stance on Israel/Palestine? [Multiple choice]



Just under half of respondents state that since October 7, 2023, they have **not** personally been affected by threats, hate speech, or other restrictions on their work (47 percent). Conversely, more than half report personal experiences such as online hate speech and threats (19 percent), accusations of antisemitism (19 percent), defamation in the media (16 percent), cancellations of events (16 percent), or institutional exclusion (14 percent).

At the institutional level, respondents most frequently perceive internal conflicts (54 percent), cancellations of events (52 percent), security concerns (43 percent), and reputational damage (43 percent). Reported responses at the leadership level include counseling services for students (49 percent) and for faculty (30 percent), self-organization among colleagues (46 percent), dialogue formats (41 percent), as well as new security measures or police interventions against protesters (33 percent and 38 percent, respectively). These measures are generally perceived positively by respondents, regardless of their personal stance on the conflict.

Positioning of Scholars on Current Controversies

To situate respondents' answers in relation to their political views, the questionnaire included an item allowing them to position themselves on a range of current controversies (q107). Among the issues covered were: the academic boycott of Israel, the call for a ceasefire in Gaza, the special protection of Jewish life in Germany, different forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation (armed or nonviolent), Israel's right to self-defense, and the restrictive handling of student protests by German universities.

Responses to these topics were then analyzed in relation to respondents' personal ties to Israel/Palestine (q105). As discussed above, these ties were highly diverse: some respondents reported a primarily scholarly interest, others pointed to family or friends in Israel or Palestine. Additional categories included Germany's historical responsibility, no specific personal connection, and other individual reasons.

Consensus on Ceasefire, Protection of Jewish Life, and Academic Boycott

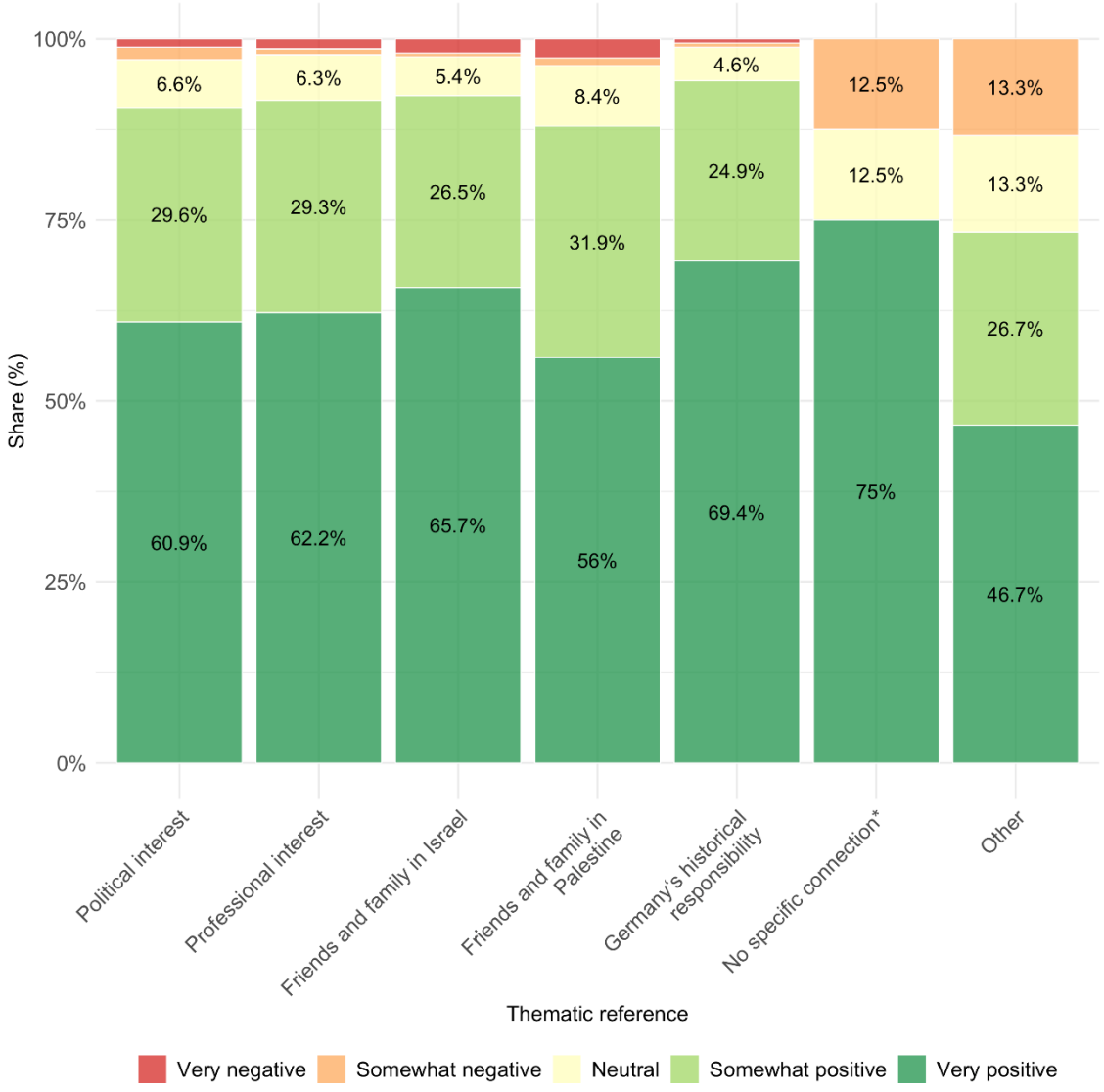
Respondents' positions turned out to be equally heterogeneous, which challenges the widespread thesis of a polarized German academic field split into a "pro-Palestinian" and a "pro-Israeli" camp. On the issue of a ceasefire in Gaza (q107_2), for example, almost all respondents—regardless of their personal connection to Israel/Palestine—expressed agreement. Only among those without a particular connection did neutrality appear slightly more often (11 percent).

A similar pattern emerges with regard to the special protection of Jewish life in Germany (q107_3). Respondents with personal ties to Israel or Palestine, a scholarly or political interest, or a connection via Germany's historical responsibility evaluated this concern predominantly as "very positive" or "rather positive." By contrast, those without a specific connection expressed more critical views: 12.5 percent in this group considered the special

protection of Jewish life in Germany “rather negative.”

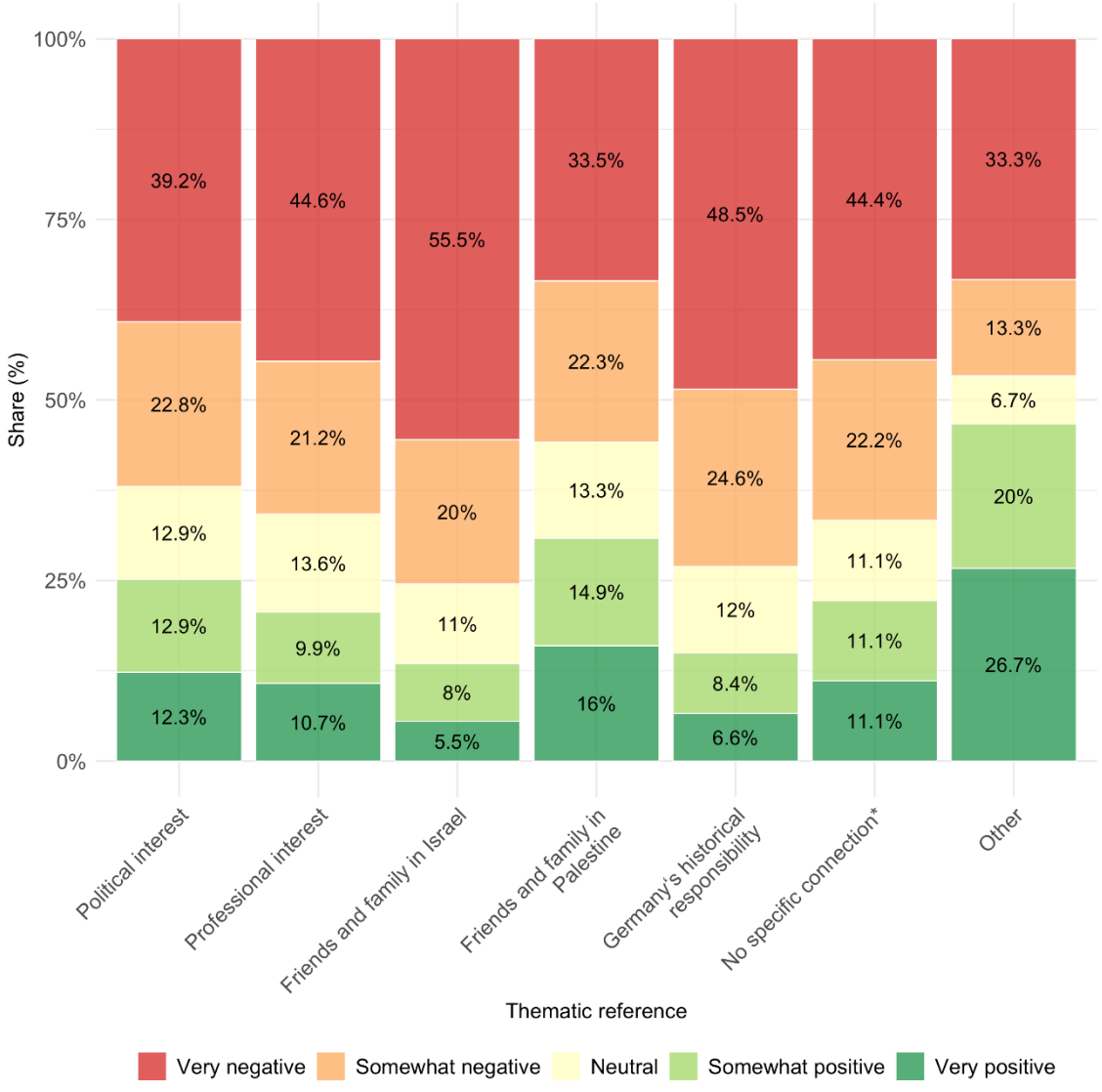
The results also show that an overwhelming majority of respondents reject calls for an academic boycott of Israel. These findings are broadly consistent with their positions on the BDS campaign. Rejection of the boycott is strongest among those with friends or family in Israel (55.5 percent “strongly negative”) and among those whose connection is primarily rooted in Germany’s historical responsibility (48 percent “strongly negative”).

Figure 14: q105 x q107_3: Position on the special protection of Jewish life in Germany



Regardless of whether respondents' connection stemmed from scholarly interest, family ties to Israel, or a sense of historical responsibility, the majority expressed a "strongly negative" or "rather negative" view of an academic boycott. The only notable divergence appears among those with personal or familial ties to Palestine: in this group, 15 percent viewed a boycott "positively," and 16 percent "very positively." At the same time, however, 33.5 percent of this group also opposed an academic boycott, highlighting the marked heterogeneity of attitudes within it.

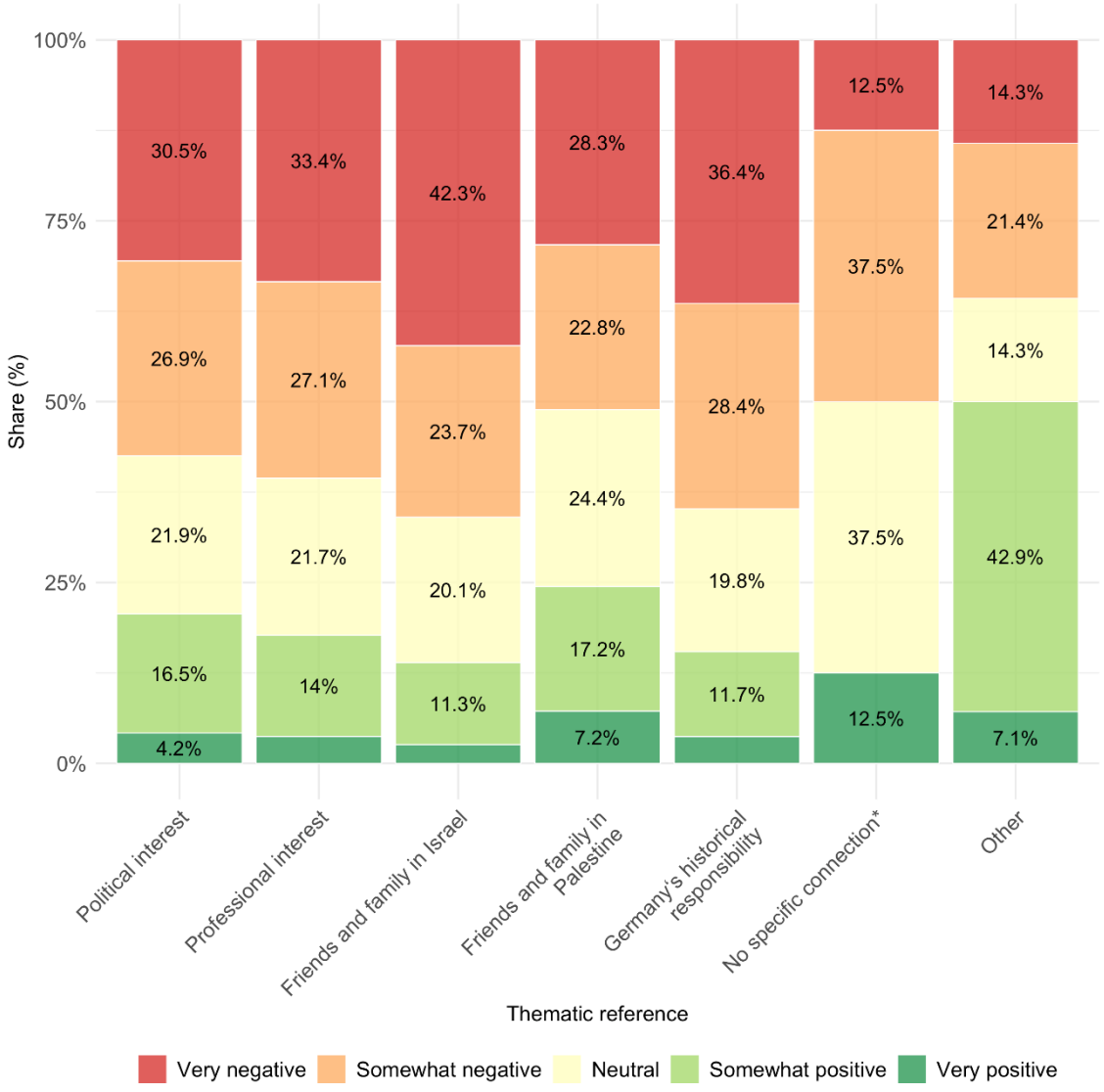
Figure 15: q105 x q107_1: Position on the academic boycott of Israel



Differences on Resistance to Israeli Occupation and Israel's Right to Self-Defense

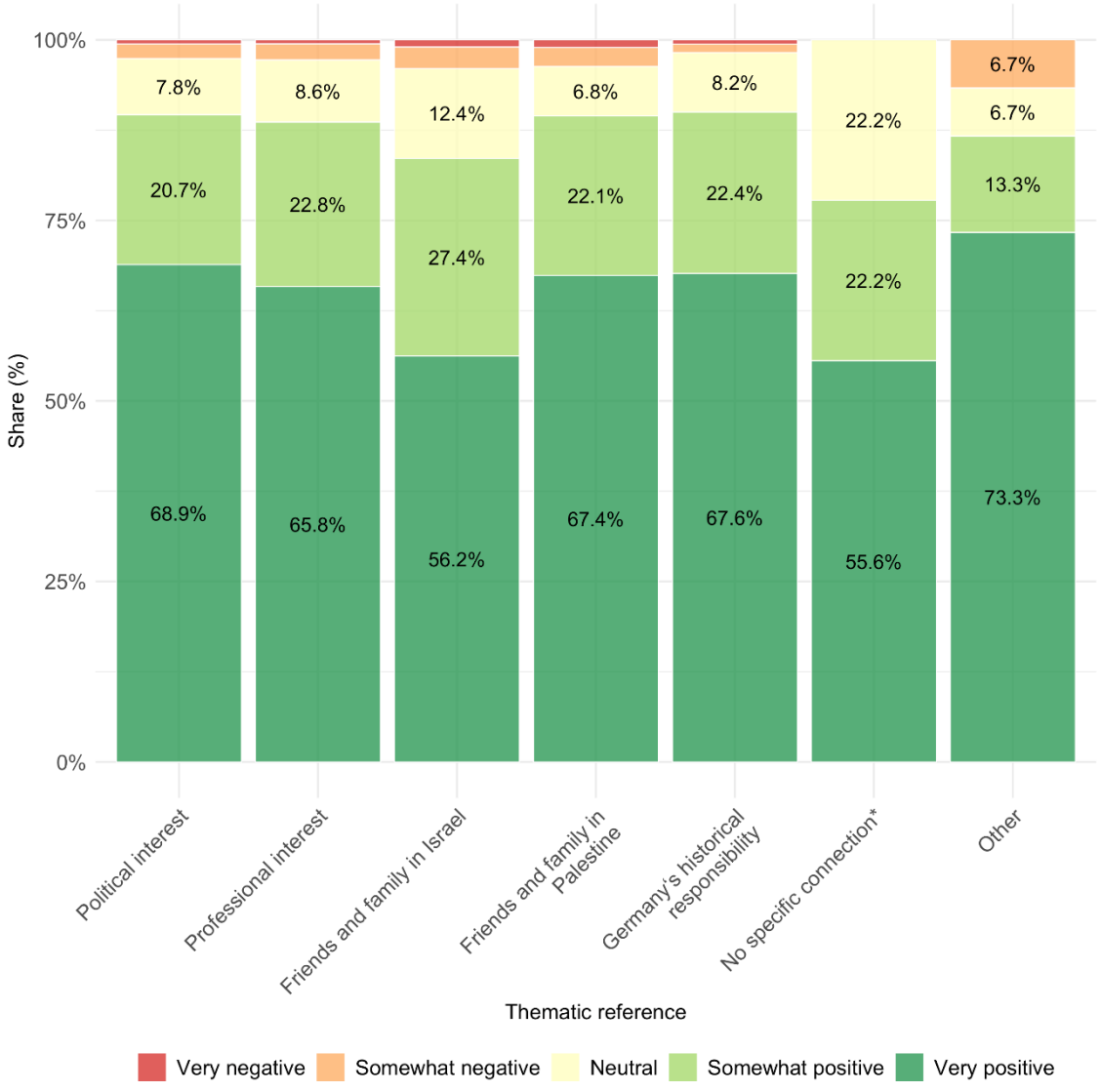
On the question of resistance to the Israeli occupation (q107_10 and q107_11), the results reveal a differentiated picture. Armed resistance is rejected by a majority of respondents ("strongly negative" or "rather negative"). An exception is the group with "other" forms of connection, 43 percent of whom evaluated armed resistance "rather positively." Notably, the highest share of respondents who rated this form of resistance "very positively" (12.5 percent) is found among those without any specific personal connection.

Figure 16: q105 x q107_10: Position on armed resistance to Israeli occupation



By contrast, nonviolent resistance enjoys broad approval: nearly all respondent groups—regardless of their connection to Israel/Palestine—evaluated it predominantly positively. Support was especially high among those without a specific connection and among those with family ties to Israel, with 56 percent in each group rating nonviolent resistance positively. Only in rare cases did respondents with personal ties to Israel or Palestine express a "strongly negative" view of nonviolent resistance.

Figure 17: q105 x q107_11: Position on nonviolent resistance to Israeli occupation



The relationship between respondents' ties to Israel/Palestine and their views on Israel's right to self-defense (q107_12) also reveals sharp differences across groups. Respondents without a specific connection were the most critical: 22 percent rated Israel's right to self-defense as "strongly negative."

By contrast, respondents with family or friendship ties to Israel expressed high levels of support, with 39 percent evaluating it "very positively" and 34 percent "rather positively." Similarly strong approval is found among those who ground their connection in Germany's historical responsibility (36 percent "very positive," 30 percent "rather positive"). Notably, even among respondents with family or friendship ties to Palestine, a substantial share (25 percent) evaluated Israel's right to self-defense "very positively."

Attitudes Toward Campus Protests

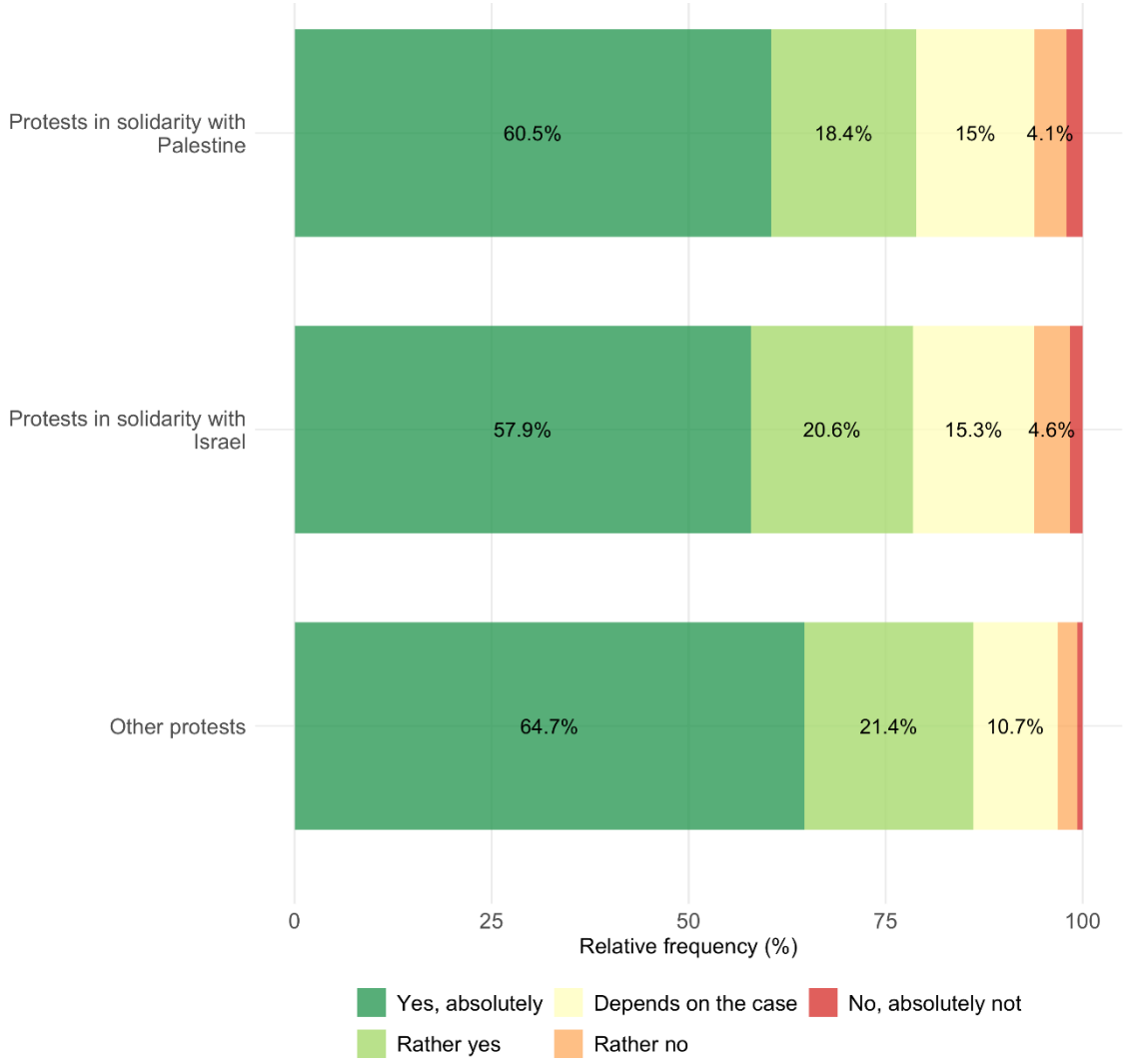
Another noteworthy finding concerns respondents' views on student protests at German universities. Overall, the right to protest on campus—regardless of political orientation—was strongly supported. Both "protests in solidarity with Palestine" (mean = 4.31) and "protests in solidarity with Israel" (mean = 4.29) received nearly identical and high levels of approval. This underscores a principled support for freedom of expression within the university space, even when the content is contentious.

Respondents also placed strong emphasis on institutional responsibility: the protection of free speech (mean = 4.80) was rated as a significantly more important task for universities than the safeguarding of undisturbed teaching and research (mean = 3.55).

At the same time, views on protests are polarized when it comes to the perceived motivations behind them. Palestinian solidarity protests are seen as driven above all by Israeli military action in Gaza (84 percent), Israeli occupation and settlement policies (79 percent), and mourning for Palestinian victims. By contrast, the main motivations attributed to pro-Israel protests are Israeli military action in Gaza (80 percent), Israel's right to exist (79 percent), antisemitism on campus (74 percent), and opposition to Hamas (61 percent).

This polarization is also evident in evaluations of how universities handle student protests. When asked about what they perceived as a restrictive approach by German universities (q107_13), respondents with specific ties to Israel/Palestine largely rated it "strongly negative." By contrast, respondents without personal connections expressed more support: 14 percent evaluated the restrictive handling of protests as "very positive," and another 14 percent as "rather positive."

Figure 18: q111: Should student protests generally be allowed to take place on campus?



Perceptions of Public and Scholarly Debates

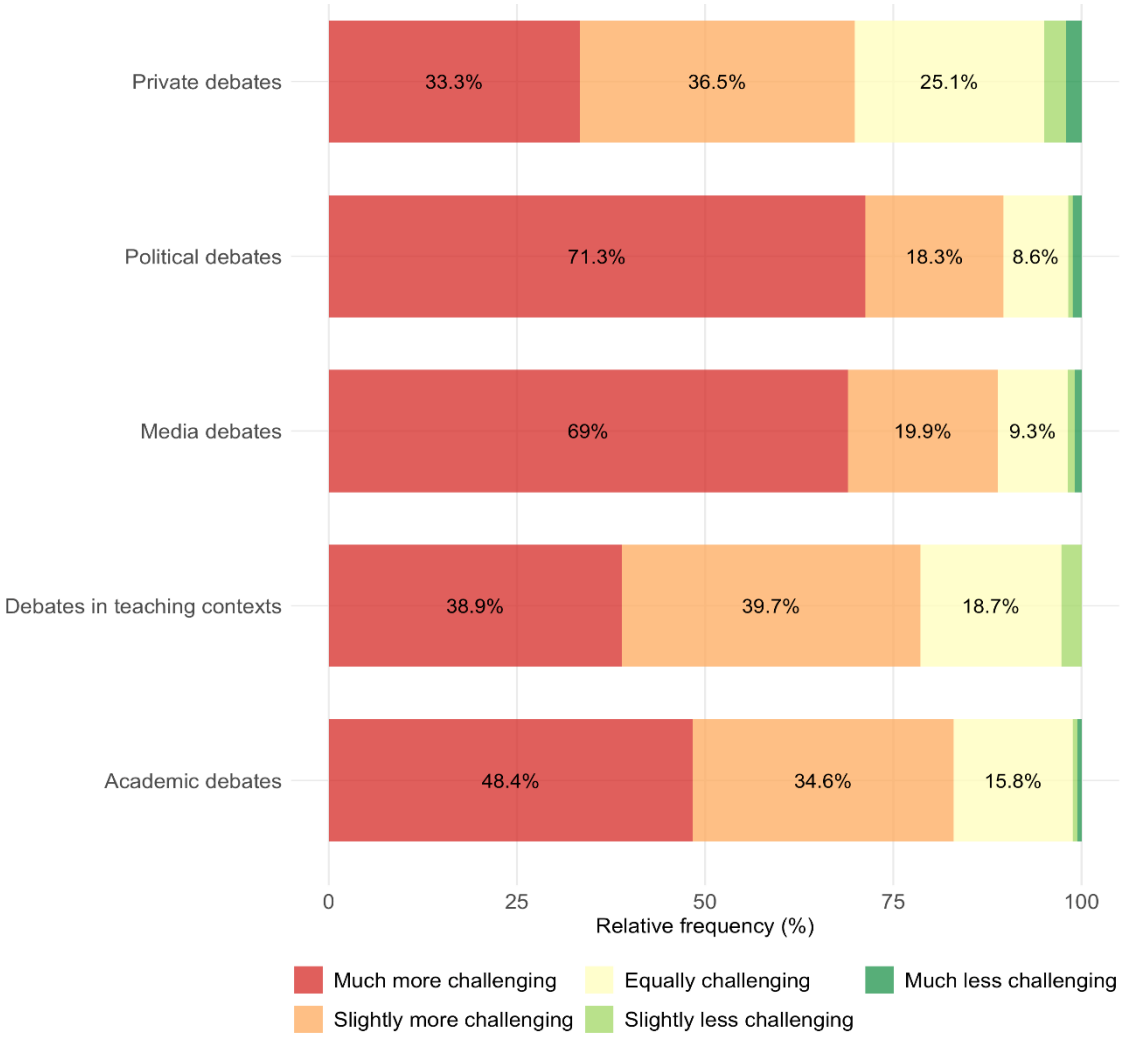
The polarization in evaluations of campus protests corresponds with a generally negative assessment of the overall culture of debate. When it comes to the level of scholarly attention devoted to specific topics, the survey results reveal clear empirical patterns. Issues such as "Israeli settlement and occupation policy" (mean = 1.51), "police violence against protesters" (mean = 1.51), and the "potential conflict between Germany's *Staatsräson* and international law" (mean = 1.56) receive the lowest mean scores. This indicates that

respondents consider these issues highly relevant but perceive them as underrepresented in public and academic discourse.

By contrast, topics relating to antisemitism and Jewish life receive higher mean values, suggesting that debates around these issues are viewed as more adequately represented or more intensively discussed. These include “perceptions of threat among Jewish students” (mean = 1.76), “the rise of antisemitism in society” (mean = 1.79), and “the need for stronger protection of Jewish life” (mean = 1.84).

Regardless of topic or disciplinary background, however, a large majority of respondents consider current debates on Israel/Palestine to be significantly more challenging than earlier controversies. Political and media debates are perceived as especially difficult, but private discussions, scholarly exchanges, and classroom debates are also widely experienced as more challenging than in previous controversies.

Figure 19: q202 - Compared to previous controversies, how do you assess the challenges arising for you from the current discourse on Israel/Palestine?



Perceptions of Threat and Empathy

Finally, the study examined whether personal ties to Israel/Palestine or respondents' political positions correlate with how they perceive changes in the threat situation for students and staff since October 7, 2023, as well as with the empathy extended to them. Assessments were differentiated for Israeli, Jewish, Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and other members of the university community.

The results show, first, that respondents without a specific connection mostly perceive the threat situation for Israeli and Jewish students and staff as having "increased" (67 percent). By contrast, respondents with personal or scholarly ties were more likely to evaluate the situation as having either "increased" or "increased significantly." For Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students, respondents across all groups largely agreed that the threat situation had either "increased significantly" or "remained unchanged."

With respect to other students and staff, the dominant perception was that the threat situation had "remained unchanged." Notably, however, respondents without a specific connection stood out: 50 percent of them reported that the threat had also "increased" in this group.

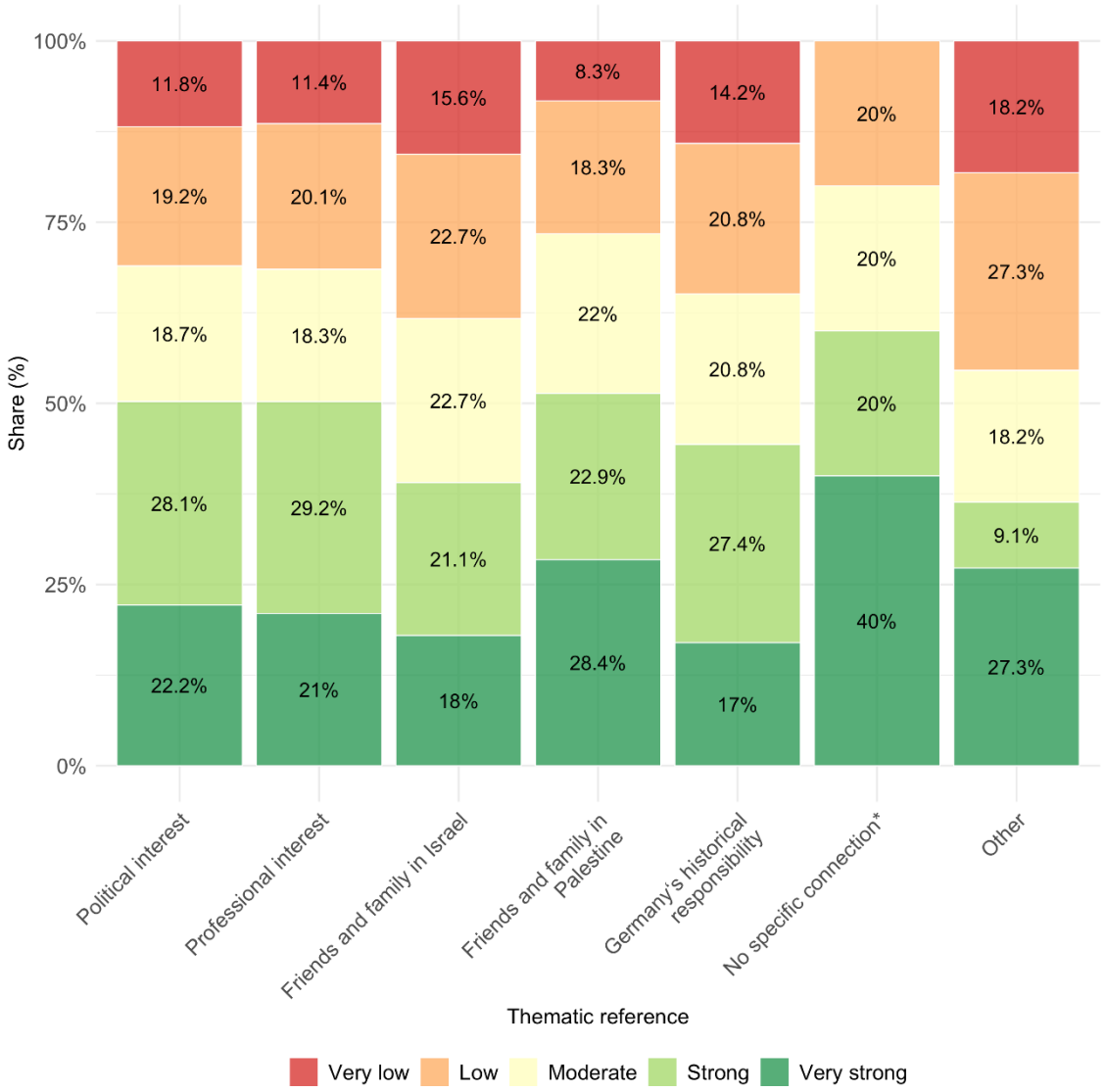
Differentiated Perceptions of Empathy

The study also analyzed how respondents—depending on their ties to Israel/Palestine—assessed the empathy extended to those affected by threats since October 7, 2023. Here, the results diverge sharply from the broadly shared view of an increased threat situation. Overall, a polarizing pattern emerges: Jewish and Israeli members of the academic community are perceived as recipients of strong empathy, whereas Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim members are more often described as groups receiving relatively little empathy.

Among Israeli students and staff, respondents with friends or family in Palestine most frequently stated that this group received "very strong" empathy (28 percent). In contrast, respondents with friends or family in Israel, as well as those who framed their connection in terms of Germany's historical responsibility, more often reported medium or lower levels of empathy. Respondents without a specific connection reported the highest value overall, with 40 percent stating that empathy toward Israelis at German universities was "very strong."

Perceptions of empathy toward Jewish students and staff are strikingly similar. Once again, the highest share of respondents rating empathy as "very strong" (40 percent) came from those without a specific connection. High values were also found among respondents with friends or family in Palestine (27.7 percent "very strong," 21.4 percent "strong"), those with a political interest (24.5 percent "very strong," 26.0 percent "strong"; q105_1), and those with a scholarly interest (22.3 percent "very strong," 27.7 percent "strong"; q105_2). Lower levels were reported among those with friends or family in Israel.

Figure 20: q105 (Connection to Israel/Palestine) x q401_1 (Empathy for Israeli students and staff)

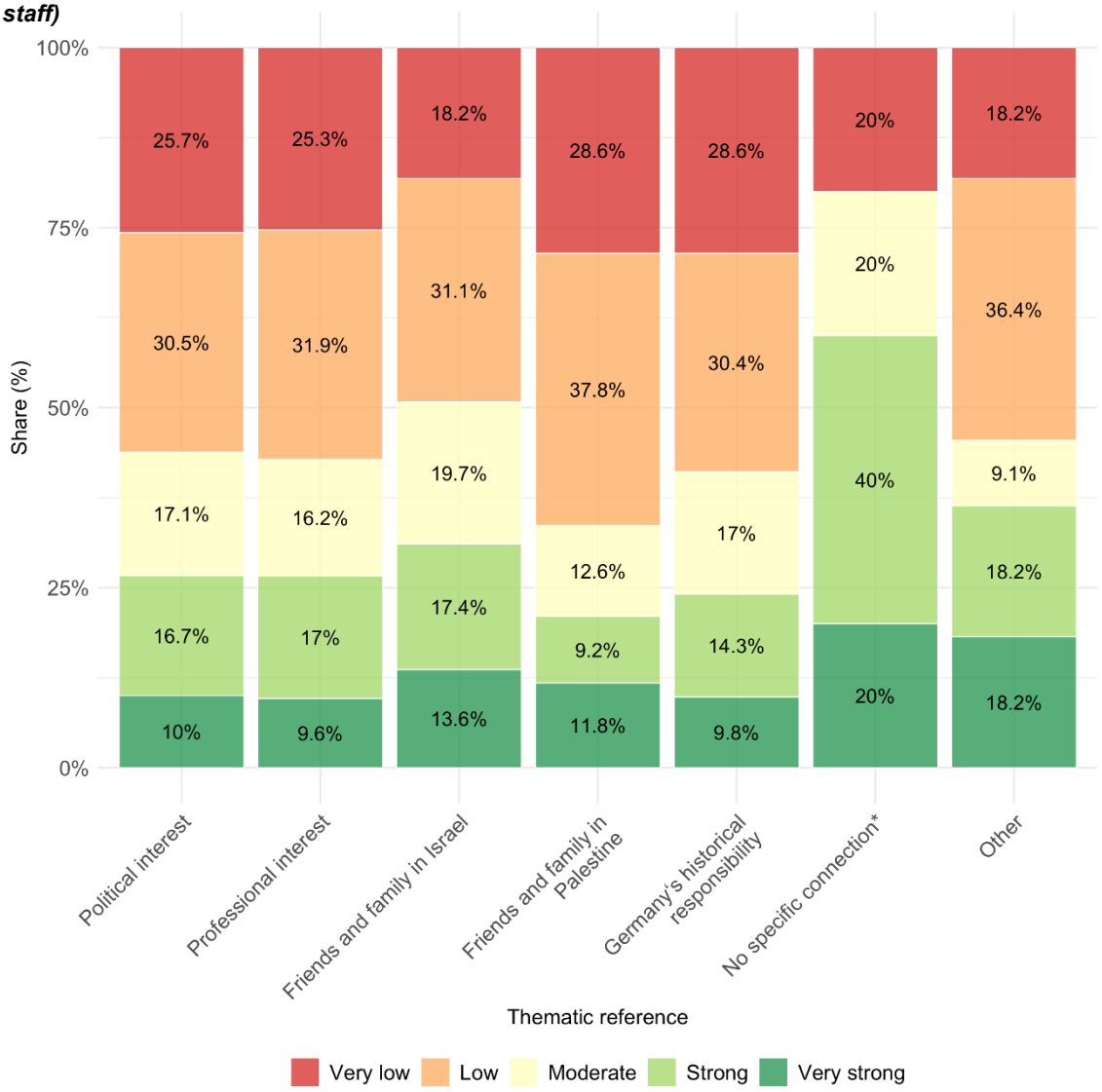


For Palestinian students and staff, perceptions of empathy are distributed differently. All respondents with a personal connection to the issue felt that Palestinians at German universities receive “very little” or “little” empathy. Those with political or familial ties to Palestine most frequently reported “very little” empathy (around 29 percent). Respondents who framed their connection in terms of Germany’s historical responsibility also tended toward low evaluations. By contrast, respondents without a specific connection stood out: 60 percent of them perceived the empathy shown toward Palestinians as “strong” or “very strong.”

This pattern extends to Arab and Muslim students. Here, too, the dominant assessment was that these groups receive “very little” or “little” empathy. Respondents with political interest or familial ties to Palestine were especially critical, with more than 30 percent in each group rating empathy toward Muslim students as “very little.” Once again, respondents without personal ties reported the opposite pattern, with 60 percent perceiving empathy toward Palestinians, Muslims, and Arab students as “strong” or “very strong.”

Other students and staff who did not fall into any of the groups mentioned above were generally evaluated more neutrally: the majority perceived the empathy extended to them as moderate.

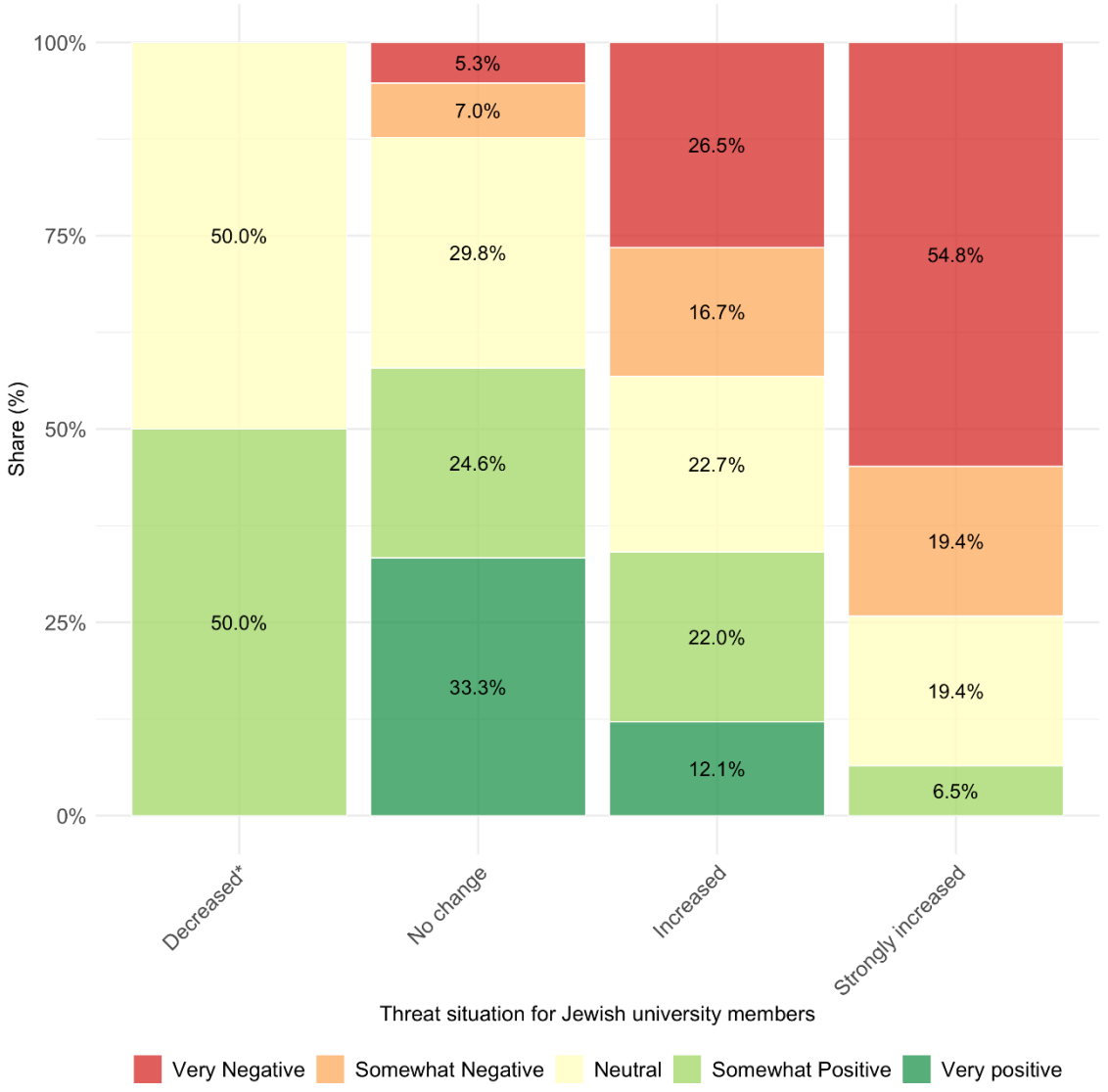
Figure 21: q105 (Connection to Israel/Palestine) x q401_3 (Empathy for Palestinian students and staff)



Political Position and the Perceived Threat to Jewish Students

Further results show that perceptions of an increasing or strongly increasing threat to Jewish members of the academic community are closely correlated with respondents' political positions on the Middle East conflict. These positions were measured through attitudes toward the BDS campaign, armed resistance, and the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which are among the most polarizing issues in the current public debate (Ambos et al. 2023; Holz 2025; Ullrich 2023).

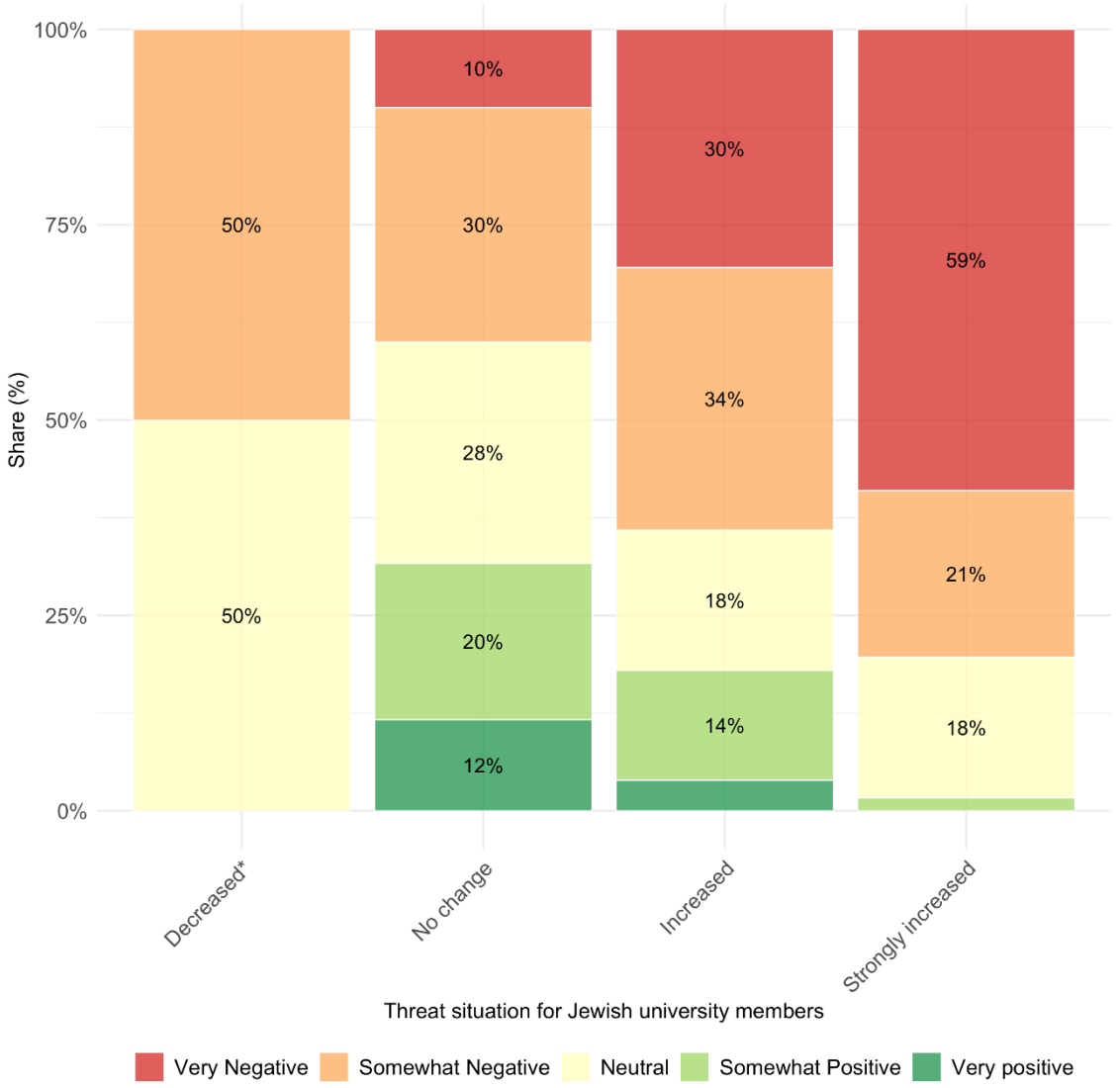
Figure 22: Q107_4 (Position on BDS-campaign) x q402_2 (Perceived threats to Jewish students and staff)



The data show that respondents who perceived the threat to Jewish students as having "increased significantly" overwhelmingly rated the BDS campaign as "strongly negative" (55 percent). Among those who saw the threat as having "increased," nearly half also expressed a negative view (26.5 percent "strongly negative," 16.7 percent "rather negative"). By contrast, respondents who assessed the threat as "unchanged" more often adopted neutral (29.8 percent) or positive positions (33.3 percent "strongly positive").

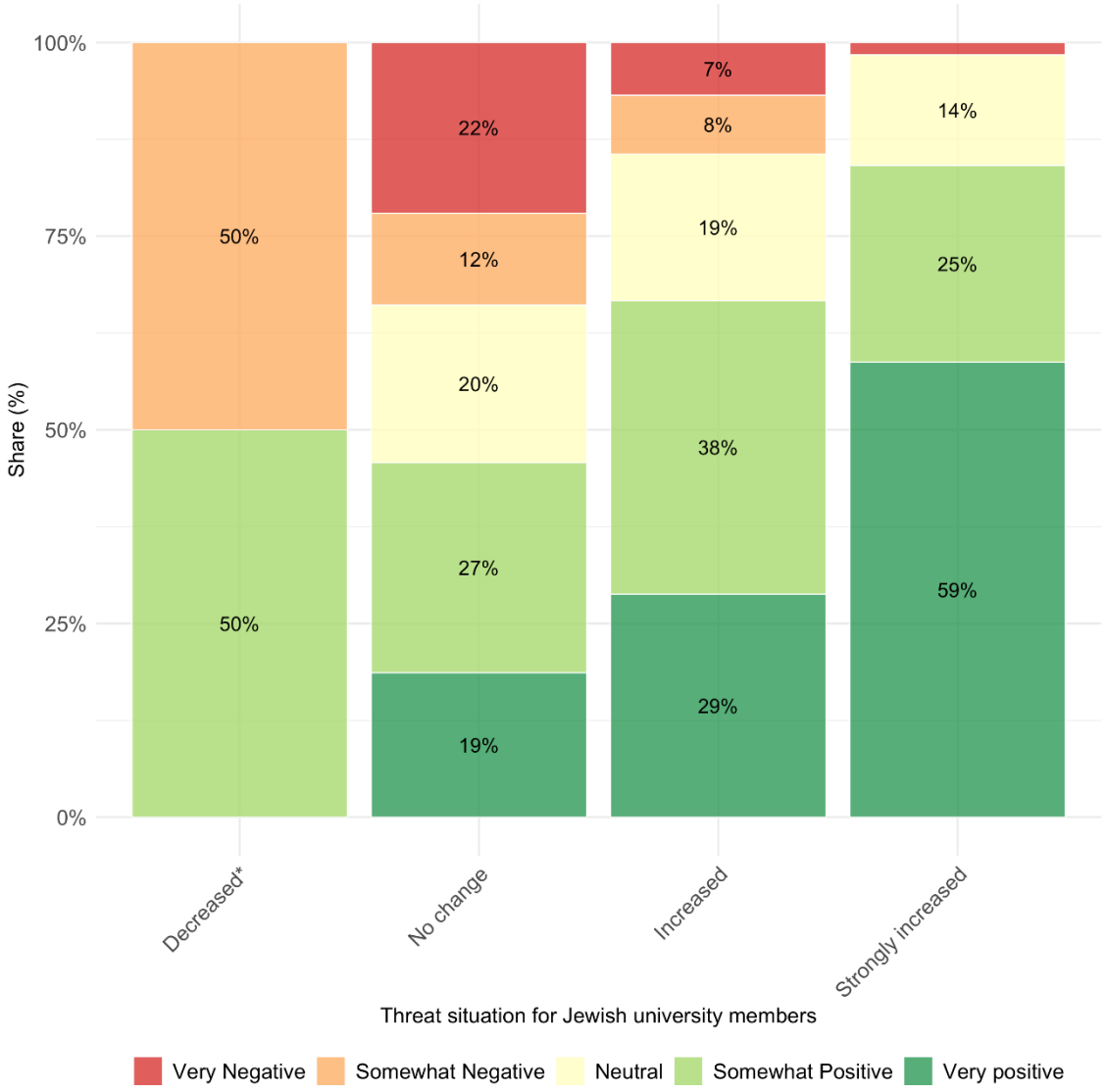
Notably, even within the small group of those who perceived a "decrease" in the threat situation, BDS was not endorsed but was evaluated mainly as "neutral" (50 percent) or "rather positive" (50 percent). Overall, these findings indicate that perceptions of a worsening threat to Jewish members of the academic community are statistically closely correlated with strong rejection of the BDS campaign.

Figure 23: q107_10 (Position on armed resistance against Israeli occupation) x q402_2 (Perceived threats to Jewish students and staff)



The analysis of attitudes toward armed resistance against the Israeli occupation (q107_10) reveals a similar pattern: the more strongly respondents perceived the threat to Jewish members of the academic community as having "increased significantly," the more often they rejected this form of resistance outright (59 percent "strongly negative"). Even among those who reported only an "increase," negative positions predominated (34 percent "rather negative"). Support ("rather positive" or "strongly positive") remained marginal across all categories.

Figure 24: q107_12 (Positon on Israel's right to self-defence) x q402_2 (Perceived threats to students and staff)



With regard to Israel's right to self-defense (q107_12), the pattern is reversed. Among respondents who perceived the threat to Jewish members of the academic community as having "increased significantly," 59 percent evaluated Israel's right to self-defense "very positively" and a further 25 percent "rather positively." Positive assessments also dominated among those who reported only an "increase" (38 percent "rather positive," 29 percent "very positive"). Rejection of Israel's right to self-defense was found primarily among respondents who perceived no change (22 percent "strongly negative," 12 percent "rather negative") or even a decrease in the threat (50 percent "rather negative"). Interestingly, 50 percent of those who rated Israel's right to self-defense as "rather positive" simultaneously assessed the threat to Jewish members of academia in Germany as having "decreased."

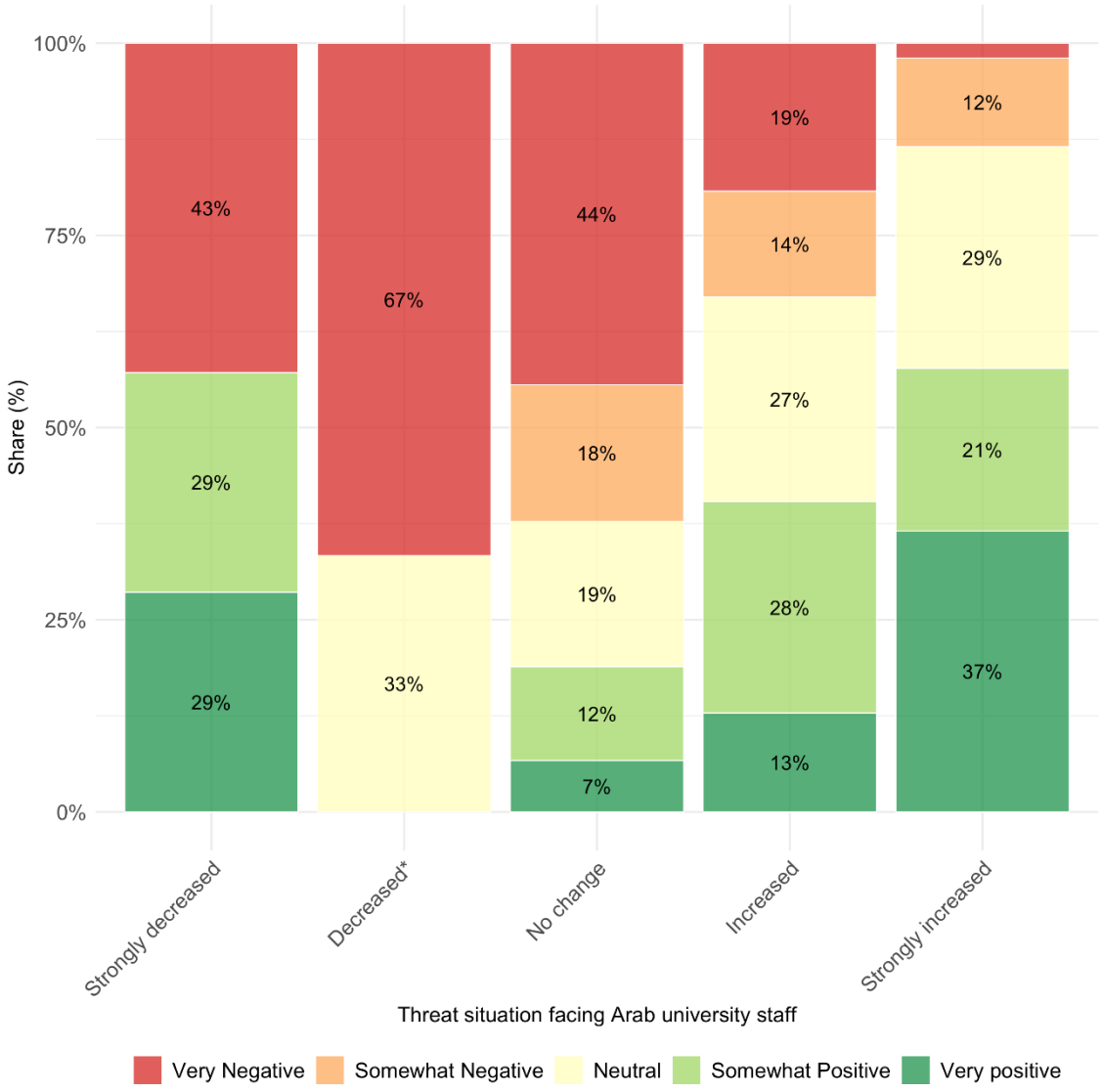
On the IHRA definition of antisemitism (q107_14)—which 64.4 percent of all respondents view negatively and only 19.3 percent positively—the results again reveal a polarized picture. Among those who perceive a strong increase in threats, 25 percent evaluated the IHRA definition "rather positively" and 21 percent "very positively," while 19 percent held a "strongly negative" and 25 percent a "rather negative" position. Nearly 70 percent of those who saw the threat situation as "increased" expressed either "rather" or "strongly" negative views of the IHRA definition. Respondents who considered the threat unchanged showed especially high levels of rejection (53 percent "strongly negative").

Political Position and the Perceived Threat to Arab Students

In a similar way, respondents' positions on core Israel/Palestine-related issues correlate with their assessments of the threat situation for Arab members of the academic community. Among those who viewed the BDS campaign "very positively" or "rather positively," the perception that the threat to Arab students had "increased significantly" predominated (37 percent and 21 percent, respectively). Conversely, those who "strongly" or "rather" rejected BDS more often believed that the threat had "decreased significantly" (43 and 67 percent, respectively).

A comparable pattern appears with regard to armed resistance against the Israeli occupation: the stronger the support for this form of resistance, the more frequently respondents also perceived a "significantly increased" threat to Arab members of academia (14 percent among those "very positive"). By contrast, 57 percent of those who "strongly rejected" armed resistance reported that the threat had "decreased significantly." Yet even within this latter group, 24 percent perceived the threat to Arab students as having "increased." The pattern reverses again in relation to Israel's right to self-defense. Respondents who affirmed this right were less likely to perceive an escalation of threats to Arab students. Among those who answered "very positively," 67 percent reported that the threat had "decreased" and 43 percent that it had "decreased significantly." By contrast, respondents who "strongly rejected" Israel's right to self-defense were most likely to state that the threat had "decreased significantly" (29 percent). Interestingly, however, even among those who evaluated Israel's right to self-defense as "rather positive" or "very positive," a combined 60 percent still assess the threat to Arab students as having increased.

Figure 25: q107_4 (Position on BDS) x q402_4 (Perceived threats to Arab students and staff)



Transnational Comparison

As noted in the discussion of prior research, the U.S.-American study conducted by Shibley Telhami and Marc Lynch through the *Middle East Scholar Barometer* provides an important point of reference for the present analysis (Telhami and Lynch 2025). In its eighth iteration, carried out between January 31 and February 19, 2025, the survey included 614 respondents and focused in particular on questions of self-censorship and academic freedom under the Trump administration and in light of new political realities since October 7. The findings draw a stark picture: already under the Biden administration, many scholars reported feeling the need to limit their public and professional positioning, but under Trump this pressure intensified considerably. In spring 2024, around 83 percent of respondents stated that they censored themselves in professional engagement with questions related to Israel/Palestine. In the most recent survey, 57 percent reported that this pressure had increased further since Trump's return to office, and 43 percent stated that they had personally experienced new restrictions or institutional sanctions in connection with the genocide in Gaza.

The reasons for self-censorship are varied, but increasingly extend beyond individual career concerns. In addition to risks of reputational damage, many point to political interventions in universities, the withdrawal of funding, and heightened external as well as internal monitoring of teaching practices and research content. Particularly striking is the concentration of pressure around criticism of Israel: 83 percent of those practicing self-censorship identified this as the main reason. In parallel, 78 percent described the period since October 7, 2023 as the most restrictive phase of their academic careers with respect to freedom of expression.

A comparison with the German context reveals both similarities and differences. In both settings, the topic of Israel/Palestine is closely tied to restrictions on freedom of speech and academic freedom, and frequently leads to self-censorship. In Germany, too, scholars report strong pressure to control their positioning and, similar to their U.S. colleagues, highlight the risk of professional repercussions and loss of funding. At the same time, in Germany, direct attacks in the form of hate speech, harassment, and silencing play a significant role in shaping scholars' self-censorship.

Differences, however, are also apparent: whereas in the U.S. the focus lies on political interventions at the national level (for example, by the administration) and restrictive legislation, the German situation is shaped more by public and media discourse as well as by institutional sanctions within universities. At the same time, German academic institutions have also introduced measures aimed at countering external interference and thereby safeguarding freedom of speech, expression, and academic inquiry in the university context.

Summary and Preliminary Conclusions

The findings presented here point to significant developments and shifts within the German academic landscape. Against the normative premise that academic freedom is a constitutive element of democratic knowledge production, the reported perceptions of restrictions and self-censorship are troubling. The data show a widely shared perception of heightened risks to freedom of speech, teaching, and research since October 7, 2023: nearly 85 percent of respondents see the threat environment as having increased. This climate is accompanied by widespread self-censorship, most often in public settings, media contributions, and even within one's own faculty. The main reasons cited are fear of misunderstanding, public hostility, and professional consequences.

Particularly noteworthy is the role of academic status. Doctoral researchers, postdocs, and those employed outside universities report the highest levels of self-censorship, naming dependence on third-party funding, fixed-term contracts, and reputational risks as key drivers. Disciplinarily, cultural studies, Arabic and Islamic studies, as well as political and social sciences are most affected. At the same time, the findings are relevant across the system as a whole: even more secure status groups report substantial restraint, though at lower levels of intensity. Taken together, the data portray a climate of caution in which the need for self-censorship is widespread and strongly shaped by career stage, job security, and dependence on external funding sources.

Respondents also report concrete incidents, ranging from accusations of antisemitism to online hate speech and exclusion from events. Yet when it comes to political controversies, the sample does not reveal a simple binary of "pro" or "anti." There is broad consensus in favor of a ceasefire, for the special protection of Jewish life, and against academic boycotts. Polarization emerges above all in assessments of armed resistance, Israel's right to self-defense, and the handling of campus protests. Particularly striking are asymmetrical perceptions of empathy: Jewish and Israeli members of the academic community are more often seen as recipients of strong empathy, whereas Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim members are described as receiving relatively little empathy. These perceptions vary systematically with personal connections and political positions, structuring the field of conflict experience within universities.

The study has limitations. Nevertheless, the robustness of patterns across status groups and disciplines, as well as their convergence with international reference studies, suggests that the identified trends are real and not reducible to selection effects. Future research should combine longitudinal data, behavioral measures, and organizational process analyses to better determine causal pathways between public pressure, institutional responses, and individual self-censorship. Comparative work is also urgently needed. The juxtaposition with the *Middle East Scholar Barometer* highlights self-censorship as an international phenomenon, but with differing institutional contexts. In the United States, national politics and legislation stand at the forefront, while in Germany the results point more strongly to pressures from public and media discourse, internal regulations, and logics

of security and reputation within institutions.

Across countries, however, the findings signal an increasing imbalance in the state of academic freedom. Several implications follow from these results for the future design of academic spaces:

1) Targeted protections for vulnerable career stages

Status-specific differences in self-censorship highlight the need for safeguards for scholars in precarious career phases who are especially vulnerable to anticipated sanctions. This includes clear and enforceable guarantees of freedom of teaching and expression, transparent due process procedures for complaints, legal protections and advisory services, minimum standards for handling allegations, safeguards against abusive campaigns, and confidential points of contact.

2) Transparent institutional guidelines

Clear policies on freedom of expression could help reduce the gap between perceived expectations and actual institutional positions. Decisions on cancellations, security requirements, and room allocation should be based on verifiable criteria and justified proportionally. External interventions should be disclosed transparently.

3) A more reflective culture of debate

Polarized perceptions of empathy point to the need for a culture of debate that acknowledges different forms of vulnerability without reproducing hierarchical solidarities among marginalized groups. This applies equally to moderated dialogues, conferences and teaching contexts, and public communication. The goal must be a campus culture that recognizes diverse experiences of marginalization without ranking empathy along identity lines.

Finally, the findings show that in the context of student protests and hardened discursive fronts, measures emphasizing dialogue, transparency, and the protection of assembly rights receive broad support. Such measures not only provide protection but also strengthen trust in the capacity of academic institutions to act, and are rated significantly more positively by scholars working on the Middle East conflict than punitive approaches or cooperation with security agencies.

At its core, the task is one of active institutional design. Academic freedom is not only to be defended when under attack; it must be proactively organized. Universities can and should—so the clear demand of respondents—use their autonomy to safeguard protected spaces for debate, strengthen vulnerable groups, counter group-based hostility, and contribute actively to the de-escalation of societal conflicts. Only under these conditions can the tension between open debate and the experienced narrowing of discourse be addressed productively.

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