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Nationalism, Social Justice, and Civil Rights: Palestinian Discourse on the Social Networks, April 2012

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With a lack of consensus in the Palestinian camp on various issues and numerous obstacles to the two main political processes – the political process with Israel and internal Palestinian reconciliation – social network users are channeling their energy in new directions. The younger generation in Gaza and the West Bank is engaged in a lively debate on social networking sites on three major subjects: the Palestinian problem; the approach to the Palestinian leadership; and the transition from violent struggle to non-violent struggle, namely, from terrorism to popular uprising through demonstrations and non-violent actions, including the hunger strike by those held in administrative detention in Israel.

Discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict centers on two main issues:

1. The weakening of the idea of the two-state solution and the strengthening of the idea of the one-state solution (*khal el-dawla el-waheda*).
2. The issue of the Palestinian refugees in the context of social justice and human rights. In contrast to the Palestinian leadership's focus on the question of the right to a state and the borders of that state, the younger generation is preoccupied with the question of identity, democracy, and human rights. In this context, they are also examining the need for a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees.

The relatively calm security situation in both Gaza and the West Bank is in part a function of two insights that are growing increasingly stronger among the Palestinians. First, past experience proves that it is precisely escalation that serves Israel's interests and over time harms the Palestinian population. Second, even Egypt and the advocates of change in the Arab world are not encouraging escalation against Israel. Their focus lies on the domestic situation, and at the present time there is little tolerance for violence based on terror and military actions.

Given this, discussion is about resistance using other, non-violent means, with emphasis on a media and narrative campaign against Israel, especially against the occupation and continued construction in the settlements. The Palestinians are engaged in obsessive documentation of actions by the IDF and residents of the territories, and they have at their disposal various media and new media channels. This allows them to disseminate unprocessed materials through You Tube, Facebook, and Twitter and among newspapers and television networks. For example, the incident in which the Danish activist was struck by the deputy commander of the Jordan Valley Brigade was used in order to strengthen claims by the Palestinians about Israeli brutality toward Palestinians and other foreigners in the territories. They are proving proficient at obtaining pictures that are worth a thousand words.

The "Hunger Games" – hunger strikes by prisoners in administrative detention held without what they see as due process – began in Egypt, and spilled over into the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, generating much attention and proving quite successful. Governments have shown they do not know how to cope with people willing to risk their lives for what is presented as a struggle for freedom and legal rights. This tactic has been adopted by the Palestinians, and as reflected on social networking sites, the Palestinians perceive that Israel too is hard pressed to cope with the quiet protest, that the expected damage to Israel's image is substantial, and that therefore Israel ultimately will be forced to change its policy. This can be seen as an "upgrade" of the idea of *shuhada*, in that individuals are willing to sacrifice their lives for the Palestinian cause without mass killing.

The relative calm in the security situation and the events in the Arab world are channeling attention to domestic affairs, both in Gaza under the Hamas government and in the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority. An open and highly critical discussion is underway about the Palestinian leadership, its inability to achieve a solution to the Palestinian problem, and its inability to handle domestic affairs such as the economy, unemployment, corruption, and civil society institutions. Some users have expressed increasingly evident dissatisfaction with both the Gazan and the West Bank leaderships and are seeking ideas on cultivating a new leadership that champions social power, and not necessarily the struggle against Israel.

The debate among Palestinians on social network sites is influenced by processes in the greater Arab world. Interestingly, the sites in Gaza are more active, and the discussion there is both more abundant and more critical; it is heavily influenced by developments in Egypt and the difficult living conditions in the Gaza Strip. The discussion in the West Bank is affected by processes underway in Jordan. At the same time, the topics of discussion are similar in both areas.

The internal Palestinian debate focuses on issues of social justice, political rights, civil rights, and human rights. National issues and processes of state-building have become of secondary importance, even though discussion of the political issue and debate on the one-state solution continues. The term “one-state,” as opposed to “bi-national state,” is not an accident; it expresses the lack of Palestinian recognition of the national rights of the Jewish people in the land of Israel, which in their view is Palestine. Therefore, this political prism and the centrality of the refugee problem converge to strive towards a demographic majority within the boundaries of the “one state.”

Although there is a sense that the Arab spring has bypassed the Palestinians, social networking sites indicate trends of change in Palestinian society, influenced by regional processes, with an emphasis on civil and political rights. Criticism is directed more toward the current Hamas and Fatah leaders who are out of touch with the needs of the average citizen and who demonstrate both disinterest and an inability to provide a solution to current problems.

It is too early to predict where the internal Palestinian processes are leading, but the ramifications of changes among the Palestinians for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain a salient factor, both in terms of conflict management and of options for conflict resolution.

