

Palestinian youth activism: new actors, new possibilities?

By Jacob Høigilt,
Akram Atallah and
Hani el-Dada

■ Executive summary

As the Palestinian national leadership remains divided and ineffective, it is natural to look to youth activism for renewal. Although young Palestinians are as a rule alienated from politics, there are pockets of dedicated activists who are able to mobilise widely from time to time and who have a fresh vision of the struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation. Their demands are for national unity, an end to co-ordination and dialogue with Israeli authorities, and a renewed, representative national leadership in the form of a revived Palestinian National Council. There is evidence of integration among these scattered milieus, but it has not yet reached a level where they engage in sustained national organisation. However, in the event of continued co-operation between leftist and Fatah youth activists in the West Bank, there is a possibility that young people may gain a voice in Palestinian politics.

Introduction

The organisations Fatah and Hamas dominate Palestinian politics. However, both have experienced a loss of trust and legitimacy as a consequence of the collapse of the peace process, authoritarian modes of government, widespread corruption and internal political strife. In polls, young Palestinians express their disillusionment with politics, the peace process and their leadership.

This situation has led several observers to argue that young Palestinians have exited from politics. To the extent that they engage in society, this takes non-political forms, according to this view. A recent NOREF/Fafo report concluded that widespread discontent with their situation among youth does not translate into increased political interest or engagement. Instead, the majority leaves organised politics and what they consider a political class associated mostly with Fatah and Hamas (Christophersen et al., 2012).

However, there are pockets of politically active Palestinian young people in the West Bank and Gaza who struggle against the occupation and the paralysis of Palestinian internal politics. This report focuses on these environments.

The main question the report seeks to answer is: what is the nature and form of the evolving youth movement's political involvement? The level of political activity, organi-

sation and ideological development are three important variables in this respect. It is also crucial for any emerging political actor to forge bonds with existing elites or to ally with other forces that are strong enough to create a new elite by themselves.

The report is based on 35 in-depth interviews with young people across the West Bank and six interviews in Gaza. Of the interviewees, 27 were male and 19 were female. Unfortunately and for unclear reasons, the Hamas authorities did not permit the project leader to enter Gaza, despite vigorous attempts by the research team. Therefore, the data from Gaza is not as complete as it should have been. The cut-off date for data collection was April 25th 2013.

An evolving, decentralised youth movement

One often thinks of student politics when hearing the words "youth movement", not least in Palestine, where the student movement was an important part of the first *intifada*. Student politics gives young people the opportunity to organise in a closed environment and forge bonds with colleagues at other universities, thus creating national, rather than local, movements. Looking at recent news headlines in the West Bank, this aspect of youth politics seems to be alive and well: over 70% of students partici-

pated in April and May's elections to student senates, and Hamas election blocs contested for the first time in many years at several universities and did well. However, speaking to students, one soon realises that the reality behind the elections façade is disappointing. Student politicians are widely seen to be grooming themselves for a future professional career first and foremost, and student politics reportedly consists of little more than providing welfare services such as subsidised photocopying for students in order to attract their votes. Fatah student leaders at Bethlehem University themselves see their mandate as limited to providing student welfare.

To find youth activists who have greater ambitions and who try to contribute something new to the national Palestinian struggle, one has to look outside the campus, to university drop-outs, youth centres in refugee camps and small clusters of young professionals across the West Bank. The youth movement that has appeared after the end of the second *intifada* is still no more than a loose conglomeration of initiatives and personalities that sometimes cross geographic and factional boundaries. They have some traits in common that justify the term "movement": a critical attitude to the policies of the Hamas and Fatah elites; independent political initiatives that seek to include the Palestinian grassroots; and a predilection for unarmed, but aggressive, struggle against occupation and the continuous Israeli land grabs in the West Bank.

The informal groups that share these characteristics are often referred to as al-Harak al-Shababi remove quotes. Groups of relatively like-minded young people are found in all the major Palestinian cities. These activists seem to agree on three issues: the political division must end, the Palestinian National Council must be revived, and there is to be no normalisation of relations (*tatbi'*) with Israel – a policy pursued today by the Palestinian National Authority (PA). On the question of a one-state or two-state solution, they have different opinions, but the predominant view is that time has run out for the two-state solution. In addition, they are all committed to a non-violent approach, building on what is commonly known among Palestinians as the *popular resistance*. This choice is not necessarily informed by ideology: there are not many pacifists among young Palestinians and it is hard to find people who are willing to criticise acts of armed resistance on moral grounds. The choice of unarmed resistance is dictated by necessity and for many it may be subject to revision given changed circumstances. Many of the young people who unite under this umbrella have taken part in or are part of the established Stop the Wall campaign, which co-ordinates grassroots, non-violent demonstrations against the construction of the separation barrier and land grabs in the West Bank.

Beyond these four issues, there is not necessarily much co-ordination or agreement among those who describe themselves as belonging to al-Harak al-Shababi. For example, during a discussion in a sit-in tent in support of hunger-striking prisoners in Deheisheh camp, Bethlehem,

one of the authors witnessed a discussion between two groups of young people, both of which identified themselves as "al-Harak al-Shababi" (the youth movement) within the camp. They disagreed sharply about issues pertaining both to camp politics and to support for the ongoing demonstrations at a nearby checkpoint.

It should be noted, however, that there seems to exist a core of activists, numbering around 50 persons, that gathers now and then in Ramallah. These activists are connected with others in Gaza, and they had a central role in the March 15th demonstrations in 2011 that saw thousands of Palestinians going into the streets in Gaza and the West Bank to protest against the division in the national movement. Importantly, this group has been willing to confront the PA openly. When Israel's then minister of defence, Shaul Mofaz, was invited to Ramallah in July 2012, a Facebook group called Youth for Dignity that was affiliated with the youth movement organised an angry protest in the centre of Ramallah. They were attacked by Palestinian security forces, harassed and beaten up, but Mofaz's visit was cancelled (O'Ceallaigh, 2012).

Similar informal groups of youth activists exist elsewhere. One notable example, because of its vigorous activity, is the group Youth against the Settlements in Hebron, which organises the yearly Open Shuhada street demonstration. In line with the local activism of many young people in the West Bank, this group is dedicated to struggling against the Israeli settlements in the city centre of Hebron that have made parts of the old city a ghost town with closed streets and checkpoints. In addition to its yearly demonstration, the group organises activities for children in the areas affected by settlements, organises political tourism, and assists people whose houses are attacked and damaged by settlers.

An interesting aspect of our interviews with activists in the West Bank and Gaza is how little they talk about religion. Their activism is informed primarily by the political realities they live and witness, and religion does not enter into the picture for most of them. There is a clear difference between Hamas members and most others regarding their view of violence, but this comes across less as a function of Hamas's Islamist ideology than as a pragmatic question of what strategy is most effective, as well as a question of sticking to party policy. As mentioned above, even though most of the West Bank activists we interviewed did not favour armed struggle, some radical leftist, non-religious men and women were convinced that the Palestinian issue cannot be solved without the use of force at some point.

A process of integration?

Youth activism still suffers from the devastating effects of the second *intifada* and the paralysing split between Fatah and Hamas, and youth initiatives are still, as a rule, relatively timid and tentative affairs. However, recent devel-

opments might signal that a process of emboldening and integration is taking place. Two examples suffice to illustrate the trend. Firstly, independent, leftist and Fatah young people came together in 2008 to create a national youth parliament that was meant to give young people a voice in society. The parliament succeeded in getting tens of thousands of young people to vote for delegates, and started organising awareness-raising work on the role of young people and women in society, as well as protesting on behalf of Palestinian political prisoners. Symptomatically, foreign funders and Palestinian authorities alike have given little support to this initiative, but the parliament still has offices in Ramallah and the organisational infrastructure exists. More importantly, the experience helped connect young people in all the cities in the West Bank – and Gaza, although the Hamas authorities eventually did not allow elections to take place there.

Secondly, there have been integrative events, of which Bab al-Shams is the best example. On January 11th 2013 a group of about 200 Palestinian activists, most of them in their twenties and thirties, erected tents on a piece of land between Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement of Maale Adummim. The area is dubbed E 1 by Israeli authorities, and plans for major settlement construction there had recently been approved by the government. Soon Palestinian and international media reported that the activists had announced the establishment of a Palestinian village called Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun), and that the Palestinian owners of the land had agreed to this move. It took the Israeli authorities more than two days to get the necessary court rulings to dismantle the tents and arrest the activists, and by that time around 2,000 Palestinians had visited or tried to visit the site, and it had got the attention of major international news outlets, such as the BBC, *The Guardian* and the *New York Times*. Bab al-Shams was hailed as a qualitative change in Palestinian resistance by activists themselves and by the local media, since the “villagers” took the initiative, established a fact on the ground, and thus caught both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities by surprise, rather than responding to an action taken by Israeli soldiers or settlers. In the course of our fieldwork we met young people from Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as well as independent ones, who came from different parts of the West Bank and who had all participated in Bab al-Shams. For the first time they had met with like-minded young people from other cities in the West Bank and engaged in open, constructive discussions about resistance strategies. The integrative effect of Bab al-Shams was obvious, but it remains to be seen how long-lasting it will be.

Current limitations of the youth movement

Integration is absolutely necessary for Palestinian youth activists to gain traction on the political scene and to remedy the key weaknesses of the movement. The first weakness is its lack of national organisation, which makes

it less cohesive and effective than it might be. All the activists in this movement we have encountered are politically sophisticated and open-minded, and they are in opposition to the current political regime in the West Bank, regardless of whether they are formal members of one of the factions or not. They happily join forces across the PFLP Fatah Hamas divides to send messages to the establishment; for example, in 2010, before the Arab revolutions, young people in Bethlehem put up a tent in Manger Square to protest against the political split, and they stayed there for about 20 days. However, they are unable or unwilling to create an alternative political organisation. This unwillingness may have several causes, but two seem more prominent than others. The first is that some youths are so fed up with hierarchies and inefficient leaders that they eschew the whole idea of an organisation with any semblance of a pyramidal structure. At the same time it is hard for them to escape society’s ascription of a factional label to them based on their families’ perceived political orientation. This restricts their ability to act independently.

Secondly, there seem to be no well-developed ideas among the activists about how the youth movement can represent a real alternative to the ossified political institutions in Palestine, represented by the authorities in Gaza and the West Bank and the formal political organisations such as the PFLP, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas and Fatah. Also, until now there have been no signs that the young people are able to form alliances with powerful forces within these organisations, a fact that severely restricts their ability to make headway in terms of both ideational and practical influence on Palestinian society. Some affiliations between young people and the older generations exist, notably between the al-Harak al-Shababi and the Stop the Wall campaign, a central part of the popular resistance, which has consciously tried to empower young people on their own terms. However, Fatah and Hamas are the keys to allowing young people a greater say in Palestine, and the leaderships of these two organisations have not seriously addressed the issue of youth.

Lastly, thus far the youth movement has not managed to break the wall of fear that stands between many young Palestinians and overt political activism. Our interviews in Nablus were deeply coloured by the stifled political atmosphere that currently seems to dominate the city, and in Gaza some of those we interviewed drew attention to Hamas’s silencing of other political currents than the Islamist one. In Bethlehem, where the climate is much freer, several young activists stated that there was no room at present for them to try and convert their ideas into practice on an organised scale. Instead, they focused on changing their own mindset and influencing people in their immediate personal circle by example.

The importance of Fatah youth activists

Given the picture of evolving networks and the obstacles they face, young members of Fatah may play a crucial role in the further development of a critical youth movement. Fatah remains the key player in the Palestinian context: it props up the PA, it dominates the Palestine Liberation Organisation and it has extensive connections on the international political scene. For meaningful change to occur in Palestinian politics and in the resistance struggle, Fatah needs to be part of the team, which is difficult, since it is also a part of the problem. Fatah's close association with the failing PA, its seeming inability to recruit young people to leadership positions and its lack of organisational discipline all contribute to the picture of an organisation in crisis.

However, the youth section of Fatah, the Shabiba, provides some of the most dedicated grassroots activists in the West Bank. Young Fatah activists were founding members of both the Palestinian youth parliament and Bab al-Shams, and they also participate in Youth against the Settlements in Hebron. What characterises these activists is their eagerness to co-operate across organisational borders and to create grassroots initiatives in the absence of meaningful resistance activities by the elite leadership of Fatah. They are measured in their criticism of their leaders, but their actions bespeak an urge to go beyond dialogue and state-building efforts and instead challenge the occupation directly.

They thus see eye to eye with independent youth activists with whom they co-operate. Crucially for any future development of the Palestinian youth movement, the Shabiba is part of a strong organisation with chapters in all Palestinian counties and universities, and it enjoys access to some of the most important members of the Palestinian elite. To the extent that Shabiba activists are able and willing to challenge the policies of their own organisation, Fatah's youth organisation may function as the main channel for political renewal in Palestine.

Interestingly, the most energetic and visionary young Fatah activists are not the student senate leaders – they come across as disillusioned and confined to working on student affairs within the campuses. Instead, young professionals and refugee camp activists in their late twenties and early thirties are the leading voices. This of course raises the question to what extent they are able to inspire and recruit the younger age cohorts, and we have not been able to answer this question within the boundaries of this project.

Three sociopolitical challenges for the youth movement: apathy, women and the Gaza/West Bank division

It is important to note some qualifications at this point, lest the reader think that there is a mass youth movement building up in the West Bank. There is no evidence of this happening. On the contrary, the activists that this report

focuses on are a tiny minority. The recent NOREF/Fafo report referred to above (Christophersen et al., 2010) shows that most young Palestinian, whether in the West Bank or Gaza, are thoroughly disillusioned and have exited from politics, regardless of whether they are students, unemployed or professionals. Our findings confirm that view; in fact, even among student politicians, there is a palpable sense of resignation, notwithstanding the fervent activity connected with student elections each spring semester. As a rule, activism relevant to the resistance struggle takes place outside campuses. Indeed, a major challenge for the Palestinian youth activists is to get university students on board en masse, as happened before and during the first *intifada*.

Secondly, the activism that does exist is male-dominated. For example, during the Bab al-Shams incident only a handful of women were present, including one of our female interviewees, who lamented the small number of women among activists. A conservative culture is probably partly to blame. Tellingly, many young females tend to engage in community-building work that focuses on improving the living conditions of children and women. This suggests a second challenge for a progressive Palestinian youth movement: unless the social situation for women is improved, significant sections of society's female half will direct their energies to social issues other than resistance against occupation.

Thirdly, the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 was damaging for all youth organisations, but the effect was even more devastating in Gaza than in the West Bank, it seems. Hamas tolerates less independent youth activism than the PA in the West Bank, and violently suppressed the March 15th demonstrations in Gaza, which were organised largely by independent young people. The Hamas authorities also closed the offices of a major non-partisan youth organisation, the Sharek youth forum in Gaza, without providing any clear reasons for this decision. Hamas internal discipline seems to be stricter than that of Fatah: while young Fatah activists willingly engage in self-critical reflection, their counterparts in Hamas stay close to the official party line. Currently, therefore, there is little overt independent youth activism in Gaza of the kind witnessed in the West Bank, and youth activists are more closely monitored and less free to engage in network-building activities.

However, our limited data does not support the notion that Gaza and the West Bank are becoming completely separated enclaves, isolated from each other politically and socially. Youth activists we interviewed in both places reported that they had co-ordinated with each other both on the Palestinian youth parliament issue and on the March 15th 2011 demonstrations, and youth activists in Gaza are no less enthusiastic about the Bab al-Shams event than their counterparts in the West Bank. Their attitudes on the resistance are also similar: among the activists in Gaza, all acknowledge the efficacy of popular resistance, but they

are by no means pacifists, and some (independent) activists also favour armed resistance as the most effective way of struggling against occupation.

Still, given the limits imposed on independent youth activism in Gaza, the onus is on young people in the West Bank to build a movement that can successfully challenge the paralysing grip that the middle-aged and old elite in the political factions has on Palestinian politics.

Conclusion

Youth frustration and restlessness are evident across Palestine, whether manifested in stone-throwing at Israeli soldiers, demonstrations against living conditions or acts of vandalism. However, for young people to gain a voice and for change to occur in Palestine, this frustration must be harnessed by more organised and politically sophisticated activists. There are pockets of dedicated activists who are able to mobilise widely from time to time and who have a fresh vision of the struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation. There is evidence of integration among these scattered milieus, but it has not yet reached a level where they engage in sustained national organisation. The main forces in the new youth movement are independent activists on the far left and young Fatah activists. Importantly, these activists seem to co-operate comfortably, raising the possibility of a loose alliance that may be able to wrench some of the power and political initiative from the ossified elites in Palestinian politics. As the political atmosphere in the West Bank is less oppressive than in Gaza, this possibility seems stronger in the West Bank.

In light of the paralysis in Palestinian national politics, there is reason to welcome this evolving and critical youth movement. However, the question of how to encourage it is not straightforward. Generally speaking, these young people are critical of European and U.S. sponsorship of

political activities, partly because it sometimes comes with strings attached (the U.S. Agency for International Development in particular has requirements that alienate many), and partly because they do not believe in the approach of the international community to the Palestinian conundrum (many are tangibly weary of foreign-funded “workshops” and “seminars”).

Change in Palestinian politics must come from within. In this process perhaps the best aid the international community can give is to avoid supporting forces and initiatives that try to suppress the critical and independent youth movement in the West Bank. In this way it may become easier for the young people to make headway within the main organisations of Fatah and Hamas, which are the keys to any mass mobilisation of youth. Young Palestinians do not need more new organisations to gain a voice: they need to be heard within the establishment. Today, however, this establishment is so hard of hearing that the youth movement has been largely forced to gather outside the organisational frameworks.

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■ THE AUTHORS

Akram Atallah is a researcher with Fafo, working at its Bethlehem office in Palestine. His work focuses on surveys of living conditions and political opinions in the region. He is a regular contributor of political analysis to the Arabic media.

Hani el-Dada is a researcher with Fafo, working at its Gaza office in Palestine. He contributes to Fafo's work on living conditions, political opinions and political development in Palestine.

Jacob Høigilt is a researcher with Fafo, specialising in the Middle East and North Africa. His main geographical areas of interest are Palestine and Egypt. Among his recent publications are the journal article "Islamism and education" and the NOREF/Fafo report *Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring* (with Mona Christophersen and Åge A. Tiltnes).

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