
The Atkin Paper Series

Palestinian Youth:
*Between Patriarchy
and Politics*

Ayed Ahmad, ICSR Atkin Fellow

July 2013

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Author

Ayed Ahmad was a Spring 2013 Atkin Fellow. Ayed has been a Project Manager at the Palestinian Peace Coalition – Geneva Initiative since 2011. Ayed is responsible for organising a wide range of events that aim to enhance moderate voices in Palestinian society, and to educate Palestinian youth on the benefits of both reconciliation and a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel. Ayed holds a Bachelors Degree in English Language and Literature from An-najah National University in Nablus, Palestine, where he researched the relationship between the East and West during Shakespearean times, focusing in particular on *Othello*. His research at ICSR focused on the feasibility of the two-state solution in light of recent political developments in the region, especially with the rise of the far right on both sides.

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Introduction

This paper examines the different reasons behind the reluctance of Palestinian youth to engage in politics and political participation in Palestine. It investigates both longstanding and contemporary factors that have played a major role in creating a gap between the leadership and the masses in Palestine throughout years of struggle with the Israeli occupation. The paper provides an insight into the social and political conditions that have affected the youth, and highlights the role of the Israeli occupation in the matter. Additionally, it suggests a number of ideas for improving the status of Palestinian youth within the country, which would also have a positive impact on Palestinian political life in general.

In most advanced societies around the world, the youth – both male and female – play a major role in politics, economics and society, enabling them to have representation in all the country's official and non-official institutions. The contribution of the young to the prosperity of their nation(s) stems originally from their belief that their participation is essential and most definitely needed, in addition to the fact that they actually have a chance to be active.

Such participation by youth in society knows fewer limits than it does in Palestine, simply because it is often not restricted to any political, conventional or religious boundaries. In England, for example, the main political concern of the youth is to enhance their representation in governmental institutions by strengthening the Youth Parliament, which has so far 500,000 voters and more than 500 elected members and deputies.¹ The presence of a younger generation is too prominent to be overlooked, as well as too active to be silenced or marginalised.

In Palestinian society, it is a different reality: youth are subject to many obstacles that hinder their efforts to play an effective role in Palestinian political life. Palestine is a patriarchal society, which affects the younger generation and their attitude towards politics in their country; on a deeper level, it has negatively affected their willingness to participate in politics. According to recent polls conducted by both governmental and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in the country, Palestinian youth are gradually becoming politically detached and less enthusiastic about taking part in politics.

The origins of this can be traced back to the end of the first Intifada (1987–1993) against the Israeli occupation. Although Palestinian youth played a major role during the first Intifada, those who gained the most from it were not even in Palestine during the uprising; yet, but who, upon their return from exile, they were given the best posts in the new Palestinian Administration; the Palestinian Authority (PA). Additionally, the PA's corruption and the Fatah/Hamas internal split are also believed

1 The Youth Parliament in the UK aims to educate young people on their role in local, national and European matters, and to provide them with the skills to be ready for the future. European Youth Parliament: <http://eypunk.co.uk/about/aims>

to have had a significant negative influence on the youth's attitudes towards their leadership and political participation in Palestine.

For instance, 71 per cent of the Palestinian people believe the PA's institutions are corrupt, as human rights violations are allowed to take place.² This has also been one of the drivers of the Fatah/Hamas internal split, which has been a huge obstacle: 60 per cent of Palestinian youth believe that it is an indirect but very influential factor that prevented them from achieving full membership at the United Nations (UN).³

These realities, and the spreading belief that there is no political solution in the near future, have made the Palestinian youth more willing to join other political institutions, provided that they are non-partisan.

Looking for other options, the Palestinian youth have found that one solution relies in the Palestinian different NGOs; mostly because they operate as a platform for young people to freely express their opinions. To them, 'freely' means free of any partisan restrictions, something they cannot do under the umbrella of their political parties. Strikingly, the percentage of Palestinian youth who affiliate themselves with political parties is the same percentage of youth who affiliate themselves with NGOs in the country which stands at (27 per cent).⁴

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_National_Authority

3 Sharek Youth Forum – The Status of Youth in Palestine 2013: <http://www.sharek.ps/new/pdfs/e3.pdf>

4 Ibid.

Counterproductive Conditions

The way in which Palestinian society is labelled as ‘young’ puts a great deal of pressure on its youth, as they are considered the seeds of much sought-after change. With 60.4 per cent of Palestinians categorised as youth (40.2 per cent of which are in adolescence), Palestinian society – compared to other societies – is supposed to be one of the most productive, especially when one considers the fact that the productivity of members in any society is at its highest between the ages of 18 and 40.⁵

Both politics and democracy is a process, but unfortunately most Palestinian youth believe that to be politically active is to simply participate in an election and to elect any leader. At the same time, Palestinian youngsters define political activism as simply affiliating themselves to different political factions in the country. This reality puts active youth, who want to play a more significant role in the political process, in a very odd situation.

For a number of reasons, varying from the political and security situation to economic and social conditions, Palestinian youth are under a lot of pressure and are stuck between two thorns. On the one hand, like other young people around the world, they are full of energy and motivation to pursue their endeavours and shape their future – and that of their own country, too. On the other hand, they are subject to a constantly changing situation on the ground, due to a number of increasing factors: continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank; Hamas’ coup in Gaza and its political ramifications; and the corruption in Fatah and the PA.⁶ These counterproductive conditions that surround the youth in Palestine operate cooperatively and simultaneously, undermining their chances of having an actual, real and tangible role.

Some scholars tend to isolate their focus and concentrate solely on one aspect of their struggle; they end up providing a very complicated, yet incomplete image of the real difficulties that these young members of society endure as part of their daily political struggle. To have a closer insight into the lives of young Palestinians, it would be better to take into consideration the following most important factors: Palestinian society as a patriarchal system; the first Intifada; the second Intifada; and the internal split.

This paper, in addressing issues of concern to the current young generation in Palestine, does not rely heavily on history but rather focuses on the present situation and contemporary incidents that have either a direct or indirect linkage to youth aspirations, as well as the hindering realities and obstacles. It investigates

5 Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC) Poll No. 79, March 2013 – Reconciliation, Obama Visit and Security Coordination: <http://www.jmcc.org/Documentsandmaps.aspx?id=861>

6 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) Poll No. 47 – Popularity of Hamas and Haniyeh Drops: <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2013/p47epressrelease.html>

the reasons behind two main facts: first, that political participation is not defined comprehensively to the youth; and second, that the youth have the potential to play a major role in politics but are being oppressed by the aforementioned factors.

Patriarchy and Youth Creativity

Although the term 'patriarchy' is mostly associated with the domination of men over women, it also embodies – in its broader definition – the mistreatment of young males by older males in patriarchal societies. Because this paper does not investigate the effects of patriarchy on women only, and because it focuses on the negative impact of patriarchy on the innovation and creativity of young Palestinians from both sexes, the different and various definitions of patriarchy will not be discussed in any more detail or in relation to Palestinian society.

What makes Palestinian society more patriarchal than other societies is the tribalism that is entrenched and internalised in the minds of its members – even the youth. This culture fills the psyche with sayings and stories that praise our elders (and, therefore, patriarchy too). One simple example of one of our most important sayings is: 'A day older is a year wiser'. This roughly translated Palestinian saying represents the essence of both tribalism and patriarchy: it not only suggests, but demands that youths follow the instructions of their elders. It pre-sets their lives and the boundaries of their creativity (if they have any left). It carries great value in respecting the elderly and in granting them this special status in society, which – in time – negatively affects the willingness of young people in the country to be innovative. This is especially harmful at a time when the country needs it most.

Starting with the late Yasser Arafat as the 'Khetyar' (a term which means the old, wise and most respected one) and until now, Palestinian political parties have been almost totally dominated by older men, who solely make the decisions, which are unquestionable and non-negotiable.⁷ The PLO internal structure is one of the best examples that support this hypothesis, as most of its key offices and positions are controlled by senior and older members.

One might argue that there are some relatively younger leaders, like Mohammad Dahlan from Fatah, but people like Dahlan are considered controversial in the Palestinian political spectrum. For example, it is widely believed that his policies in Gaza during the PA's rule were the sole reason behind the Hamas coup and therefore caused the current political split. Despite Dahlan denying these accusations, they have still tainted his credibility and reputation. Palestinian youth do not look up to Dahlan as a young leader, and definitely not as a role model who represents the youth. What the Palestinian people need is representation: they need to be heard, and that cannot be guaranteed unless they have someone who is able to relate to their needs and aspirations.

Thus, in these family-like political parties and political systems, young people have no noticeable presence, and therefore they act passively in reaction to the different changes and developments around them.

7 Another term for Khetyar in the Arab communities is Al Kabir, which means the eldest and the most respected one, whose wisdom and knowledge are unmatched by other members in the same family.

Amanda Manasra, a political and feminist activist (and a psychology student at Abu Dis University in Bethlehem) argues that ‘... part of our culture is to believe that the older you are the wiser you are; we are so attached to this culture’.⁸ According to Manasra, this way of thinking not only suggests that we (the youth) follow the elders, but that we are bound to accept whatever they believe in, because we are supposed to.

Despite the fact that the youth were the cornerstone of establishing the now-leading Palestinian political parties, their influence nowadays is only relatively noticeable in carrying out the will of these parties (meaning the will of the elders). With their youthful energy they take to the streets, chanting, crying and even mobilising for what they think is right, patriotic and absolutely necessary, for ideas that were invented by party leaders.

One of the best embodiments of patriarchy is the mono-party system which, contrary to common belief, did not really end in the legislative elections of 2006, when Hamas won the majority of mandates. Since the beginning of the Palestinian struggle, there has always been one party in control of all the political aspects: Fatah. Despite all the disagreements inside the PLO, Fatah has always been the number-one party, from being able to maintain a strong presence in the struggle since the early beginning. Having one dominant and powerful Palestinian party, in a fundamental sense, does not cause any damage. However, seizing power, marginalising the other, and preaching political pluralism while practicing the exact opposite, was an issue.

One turning point in modern Palestinian history was the establishment of Hamas as the political rival of Fatah. This led Fatah, especially under the PA, to suppress Hamas and its followers, preventing them from practicing their political rights. This evolved into one of the significant reasons why officials in both parties do not like each other and have ended up fighting for power. The exaggerated respect to Yasser Arafat was a significant reason why Fatah took control and dominated the political landscape in the country: part of paying respect to him was by supporting Fatah and then going to vote for them at the polls.

Another dangerous implementation of patriarchy took place during the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, when young people – like myself – went to the elections and voted for Fatah and Hamas based on their prior beliefs which were shaped by their elders (mostly male elders). A quick ‘chit chat’ with most Palestinian minors anywhere in the West Bank or Gaza reveals a lot about this occurrence: these young supporters affiliated themselves with a party because their parents were either Fatah or Hamas supporters. Such an example cannot be given for other parties, like the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), because they have proven that their supporters are politically more aware than their peers.

Dr. Khaled Sha’ban, a researcher at the Palestinian Planning Centre in Gaza, argues that the reason why Palestinian youth have almost no presence in the political landscape is the fact that the electoral system is depriving them of that.

8 Amanda Manasra, Palestinian political and feminist activist: Skype interview, 27 April 2013

'[T]he electoral system [in Palestine] consists of two main systems [...] on the one hand there is the electoral lists system, which must include prominent social and political figures, those with a greater chance to win the election ... this of course limits the possibility of youth to be included in these lists'; and, 'on the other hand, the individual electoral system, which requires both social status and profound skill sets, both of which a young Palestinians would not have'.⁹ These points are another example of the absolute dominance of the elderly in Palestine, which over time has meant that the youth play a very basic and marginalised role in politics.

Additionally, the fact that Palestinian political parties have been headed by the same people for over 40 years has made the situation even more complicated. This is especially so if we add to that the fact that these parties are not keen on introducing new leaders, or they very carefully choose who should be 'introduced'. Regarding this, Miss Manasra argues that '... the Palestinian leaders do not invest in the youth, to start with ... they do not work on their leadership skills, they do not empower them, or enhance their role and participation [...] we all are capable of leading, but we do not have the chance, nor the required support'.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the youth steered the national resistance during the first Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, and despite the fact that their efforts contributed to the creation of the PA, the PA's key positions were still restricted mainly to a group of Palestinians returning from abroad. Those who got the highest positions were those who returned with Arafat from exile (from Tunisia, Lebanon, Libya and other Arab countries). Thus, the first group of Palestinian leaders came with a very limited idea of the real nature of the Palestinian people and their struggle, and they were quite literally imposed on the people.¹¹

Young Palestinian local leaders were mostly given executive positions within the PA, which left them without any political weight or clout as these roles meant they were not included in decision-making circles. The fact that they were put in such positions as heading the Palestinian Security Forces, for instance, put them in a very odd predicament: it meant that they had to follow the orders of their superiors who were instructing them to suppress the opposition, particularly Hamas. Subsequently, this has led to Hamas being able to accuse PA forces of human rights violations. These continue even now, with evidence documented in reports issued by independent NGOs operating both in and outside of Palestine.¹²

Political patriarchy in Palestine has produced what I would call a 'light version' of a dictatorship, resulting in oppression, human rights violations, the internal split and most importantly, a new and less tolerant Palestinian generation. According to a report published by the Sharek Youth Forum this year, 39 per cent of Palestinian

9 Dr. Khaled Sha'ban, 'Promoting Youth's Participation in the Palestinian Political life': <http://commerce.iugaza.edu.ps/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=UkJ-sLV3IQ0%3D&tabid=4188>

10 Amanda Manasra interview (April 2013)

11 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_National_Authority

12 Marsad, The Palestinian Security Forces Observatory, 'Palestinian Authority Security Agencies "Undermine" Human Rights', 30 December 2012: <http://www.marsad.info/en/content/palestinian-authority-security-agencies-undermine-human-rights>

youth nowadays do not affiliate themselves with any political party because they '... do not trust these parties any more ...'¹³ However, the fact that most of these Palestinian youngsters refuse to be part of the political system does not mean that they do not care: most are involved in voluntary work in their societies. According to the same study by the Sharek Youth Forum, some 57 per cent of Palestinian youth left political activism and joined the different local bodies in their areas – and therefore are maintaining a certain level of activism, even if only a part of what they are looking for.

13 Sharek Youth Forum – The Status of Youth in Palestine 2013: <http://www.sharek.ps/new/pdfs/e3.pdf>

Cycles of Violence: Two Intifadas and Occupation

Palestinian Youth and the First Intifada

The first Intifada was a violent, yet unarmed, Palestinian revolt against the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in the occupied territories in Palestine, starting in December 1987 and officially ending two years after the Madrid conference in 1991. It was initiated solely by the Palestinian youth, without referring to the PLO or any other political representatives (who were still based in Tunis at that time). The Palestinian youth used different methods in resisting the occupation, varying from civil disobedience to actual violent clashes with Israeli forces (involving Molotov cocktails, barricades that prevented the advancement of Israeli forces and other means). During this time the Palestinian youth were at their peak; they were organising, leading and shaping their own Intifada. This was very much their own initiative and they were in control of it.

Until January 1988, the presence of the PLO in Palestine was weak. Arafat was busy travelling the world and advocating for the Palestinian cause internationally. The youth faced a truly cruel test, in which they excelled and achieved what the Palestinian people would later realise as their greatest achievement. With 'peaceful' means, and no armed, the Palestinian youth drew the attention of the whole world and shed light on their aspirations of freedom and self-determination. Their efforts during the first Intifada were real evidence that Palestinians were able to directly engage the occupation, without the help or contribution of other Arab countries.

Moreover, maintaining unarmed resistance against Israeli forces introduced a new and different method of resistance, which was later adopted by the PLO and was announced in a speech that Arafat made on 13 December 1988. During his famous speech at the UN, Arafat, among other things, set the outline of the coming stage of the Palestinian struggle for independence: he reaffirmed the right of the Palestinian people to resist occupation provided it is a peaceful resistance. This announcement constituted a turning point in the conflict as it paved the way for the PLO being removed from terrorist lists, the start of the Oslo accords and the formation of the PA.

The young Palestinian protesters – mostly university-aged Palestinians – ended up with a full sense of empowerment, as they knew they had been successful in sending a convincing and effective message to multiple audiences (namely, Palestinians, Israelis and the international community). These young protesters formed a very sophisticated system of resistance, which they called the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), through which they were able to play a significant role in the different levels of the struggle: they took part in decision-making as well as in the implementation of those decisions.

For the Palestinians, the first Intifada achieved numerous results on many levels:

- The Palestinian people were able to reaffirm their identity and right of self-determination independently, without referring to other Arab countries.
- They were able to break the image of a united and Israeli Jerusalem, and reaffirmed the fact that there is another people living in the area, thus introducing to the world the Palestinian narrative of the conflict.
- They attracted the attention of the international community to their cause, and exposed the brutality of the IDF in the occupied Palestinian territories (especially through American media criticism of the IDF's tactics in dealing with peaceful protests).
- They provided Arafat and the PLO with the necessary confidence to engage in controversial political decisions that led to the Madrid Conference, recognising the state of Israel, amending the PLO charter and, most important, the Oslo Accords.

However, things were not as bright as they seemed for the youth. From January 1988, the PLO started to actually take part in the Intifada, essentially controlling the masses and the way things were developing on the ground. This control was guaranteed by what was known then as 'leadership leaflets' which were exclusively issued by the PLO leadership in Tunisia and used to mobilise people throughout the different stages of the uprising. Despite the fact that the PLO basically confiscated the initiative of the Palestinian youth, they still gave Arafat a warm welcome in Gaza and Jericho, and considered him to be the saviour of the Palestinian people.

Beyond their unconditional love and respect for Arafat, the Palestinian youth had high expectations of the PA, centred around their aim of achieving statehood in the near future. They had no idea that the PA would prove so corrupt, and definitely did not realise that they would be divided between Fatah and Hamas as a result of the unwise rule of Fatah. The PA brought a great deal of bureaucracy along with it, and Palestinians who had just revolted against Israeli injustice were shocked by another type of injustice, best exemplified by corruption and a modern version of dictatorship – or, in other words, a paternal-like political system.

The deeper impact of one-man leadership was felt strongly after Arafat passed away in 2004, leaving behind a legacy that no one in Palestine could resolve – basically, a system that needed an emperor rather than an elected president. Arafat was not just a leader: he was seen as a father, and as a founder of the Palestinian cause, struggle, and to some extent identity, which granted the ability to basically resolve any internal dispute that might erupt among Palestinians. It was just a matter of time before the youth would meet their most dangerous enemy: the internal split between Fatah and Hamas.

Palestinian Youth and the Second Intifada: The Beginnings of Palestinian Youth Retraction

The second Intifada brought major change to the situation in Palestine. With a depressed and stressed Palestinian youth who saw no hope in the political process and Israel trying to impose an Israeli-American solution on them (which, as they saw it, overlooked UN Resolutions 242, 383 and 194), the eruption of the second Intifada was just a matter of time.¹⁴ On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon, who was then the leader of the Israeli opposition, decided to go on a provocative tour of the Al Aqsa mosque compound in the Old City in Jerusalem. This resulted in violent clashes between Palestinian civilians and the IDF. The visit and subsequent violence was the spark of the second Intifada, which lasted until November 2005 and led to a devastating number of casualties on both sides (more than 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis).¹⁵

Although the second Intifada ended in Palestine, the situation in Nablus and Jenin (two major Palestinian cities) was still subpar, as the PA was not able to restore order in these two cities because of the considerable number of illegal militants based there. At the beginning of the second Intifada, these armed groups and militants were respected and appreciated among the Palestinian youth, especially as the PA forces had almost no presence during the recurrent invasions of the main Palestinian cities by the IDF. These young fighters were seen as the brave protectors of these cities, patrolling the streets at night and making sure people were safe, protecting them from the IDF and any other threats. This situation contributed to a more general feeling of despair among the already disappointed Palestinian people, and in particular youth.

Unlike the first Intifada, the outcomes of the second Intifada were a huge surprise to the Palestinian people in general, and to the youth in particular. This eventually broke the image of the Intifada in the minds of these youngsters, because the chasm between the expected results and the real results was enormous. Instead of more international support, an end of the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians woke up to some very dangerous realities, the most important of which were:

- Massive loss of lives among civilians
- Sharp economic decline
- Land confiscation, either to build the separation wall or to secure it
- Continued and systematic land theft by settlers, protected by the IDF
- The end of the Oslo Accords as they knew them, especially with the Israeli government's refusal to continue with the phased withdrawal as agreed in Oslo

14 These resolutions addressed central issues for the Palestinians, such as the right of return of refugees, and the right of self-determination and self-governance.

15 There is a small dispute, however, regarding the total number of casualties and their categorisation (ranging from full combatants to noncombatants and other categorisations) on both sides. These details are irrelevant to the paper's aim. B'Tselem's detailed report of casualties: http://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20100927

The Palestinian youth are now dealing with a reality that is contradictory and constantly changing. On the one hand, they are not willing to engage in a long term 'violent' confrontation with the IDF; they have lost faith in 'violent' actions.¹⁶ Even if unarmed resistance is not classified as violent, they still refrain from taking part in demonstrations now.

On the other hand, according to recent polls, 83 per cent of Palestinians (youth included) support non-violent methods to end the conflict and establish a Palestinian State, which means that they support the current leadership's peaceful approach.¹⁷ Palestinian youth are not willing to engage in violent actions against the IDF, but they are frustrated seeing their land being confiscated on a daily and systematic basis around the West Bank. To them, the separation wall and the settlements are literally destroying their dream of independence, state-hood and self-determination, and it leads these young people to a state of limbo where they are preached one thing and then living the exact opposite of it on the ground.

16 The massive casualties during the Second Intifada constituted a shock to the Palestinian youth afterwards. Additionally, their attitudes towards violence were later shaped by observing the dramatic changes on the ground that were imposed by the Israeli government(s). They understood well that the Israeli governments were and still are using security reasons to confiscate more Palestinian lands, and to impose new realities.

17 Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC) Poll No. 79, March 2013 – Reconciliation, Obama Visit and Security Coordination: <http://www.jmcc.org/Documentsandmaps.aspx?id=861>

The Palestinian Internal Split

The tension between Fatah and Hamas is not new: it began in 1987, when Hamas was established and some Palestinians tried to force a belief that its establishment was a conspiracy to weaken Fatah. The fact that Arafat was highly respected kept the tension between the two rival parties under control for years, especially since Hamas – the apparent political rival of Fatah and Arafat – knew for sure that filling Arafat's place was almost impossible. When he passed away, the situation dramatically escalated and resulted in the Palestinian internal split.

After winning the legislative elections of 2006, the Hamas government was besieged by the international community, Israel and Arab countries, leading local Hamas leaders in Gaza to plan a revolt against PA forces there, which had already been weakened by years of corruption. It is argued, though, that the deterioration began on 15 December 2006, when PA forces in Ramallah fired on a Hamas rally demonstrating against the alleged PA attempt to assassinate Ismail Haniyeh, the Palestinian prime minister at that time. The fact that Fatah was at the time in a petty quarrel within itself and lacking strong leadership (which had led to its dismal performance in the elections) helped Hamas to take over control of Gaza relatively easily, due to its strong discipline and organisation. The internal conflict in Fatah was obviously a product of the lack of organisation inside the party; after Arafat, some parties in Fatah felt unrestrained and started pursuing their own personal narrow interests.

The outcome of the internal split was yet another cruel reality that Palestinian youth have had to live with for a long time. With continuous, heated media exchanges between the disputing political parties, the national project – to which the Palestinian youth are clinging – is at huge risk, given the vast differences between Fatah and Hamas ideologies. (The Palestinian National Project is the political program of the PLO which aims at establishing a viable Palestinian State alongside the State of Israel on the 1967 borders, with east Jerusalem as its capital). The youth are now facing another test. On the one hand, they have always been politically affiliated to one of the parties, which means that respecting the leaders and their decisions is a must (parental systems); but on the other hand, they are disappointed by their leaders' political stances regarding the split and reconciliation.

After witnessing the negative ramifications of the internal split, both on the personal and national levels, the Palestinian youth are fed up with both quarreling parties. An opinion poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC) in March 2013 shows that the vast majority of the Palestinian people want to end the split between Fatah and Hamas at any cost. Although they are aware of the possible outcomes of reconciliation, and the fact that Israel and the US might impose

sanctions on them, they insist that the two parties must achieve reconciliation.¹⁸ It is known to the Palestinian people that the American view of the conflict in the region is seen through an Israeli perspective, and Israel refuses to talk to the Palestinians because they do not have a united leadership, which implies that the Israeli government's condition for returning to peace talks is Palestinian unity. At the same time, however, the Israeli government refuses to talk to Hamas, or any Palestinian government that includes Hamas in it, which implies an Israeli rejection of unity talks and thus Palestinian unity.

However, young Palestinians are not reacting in the expected manner – or at least, they are not as active as they were before. They believe that ending the split is a national priority and very essential politically and socially, but they are still hardly doing anything about it. Their reaction usually comes in the form of shy protests every now and then, except for one or two major protests in Gaza and Ramallah organised by the Palestinian Peace Coalition – Geneva Initiative (PPC-GI) and the Sharek Youth Forum.¹⁹ This 'slow' reaction to the situation is a dangerous indicator that was pointed out by one of the recent polls conducted by the Sharek Youth Forum, which states that the Palestinian youth have lost faith in both the political factions and the current political leaders.

The youth's reluctance to participate in these protests stems from a cumulative sense of despair. The fact that they have lost faith in their political leaders is another indicator that is very important when it comes to measuring youth involvement in the political life of Palestine. Among the youth who participated in Sharek's 2013 polls, 68 per cent agreed that the split is causing great damage to the cause of statehood and negatively affecting regional and international solidarity among Palestinians.²⁰ When asked about the representatives of the Palestinian people and the legitimacy of the current leading parties, 42 per cent stressed that they believe none has legitimacy whatsoever while the split still exists between the 'brothers'.²¹

The aspirations of Palestinian youth are simply to end the occupation and to establish a democratic and free state in accordance with UN Resolution 194 (which tackled various issues in the conflict, but mainly Jerusalem and refugees).²² However, 60 per cent of the young poll participants were unconvinced that establishing a Palestinian state is possible '...due to internal and external factors ...'.²³ With the split a major obstacle, the youth are uncertain of how the future will look (in addition to their lack of confidence in the PA's institutions, which they regard as being corrupt to the core).

18 Ibid.

19 Palestinian Peace Coalition – Geneva Initiative is a Palestinian political, non-partisan institution that operates in Palestine and Israel [<http://www.geneva-accord.org/>]. Sharek Youth Forum is a Palestinian independent, apolitical and impartial youth organisation [<http://www.sharek.ps/index.php>].

20 Sharek Youth Forum – The Status of Youth in Palestine 2013: <http://www.sharek.ps/new/pdfs/e3.pdf>

21 Ibid.

22 UN Resolution 194: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UN_Resolution_194

23 Sharek Youth Forum – The Status of Youth in Palestine 2013: <http://www.sharek.ps/new/pdfs/e3.pdf>

Additionally, in any democratic country, the legislative council or parliament is the official body responsible for representing the people, enacting laws and monitoring the work of executive authorities. The basis of what the legislative body does is to protect the interests, freedoms, lifestyle and safety of citizens; without it, there cannot be democracy or, subsequently, safety and stability. In Palestine's case, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) has been dysfunctional since 2007 (i.e., since the Palestinian internal split) and reactivating it is one of the youth's major concerns when it comes to ending the split between Gaza and the West Bank. In fact, the underlying reason why the Palestinian youth take to the street is their belief that without the PLC they have no chance to have a meaningful role in politics.

Concerning the external factors that are contributing to the Palestinian youth's feeling of uncertainty, the incapability of the international community to force a solution on Israel is one major factor. This particular factor was largely attributed, by Palestinian youth, to the fact that the Palestinian political factions are not united, which has led to a politically fractured Palestinian representation. Thus, the Palestinian factions are not ready yet to gain support, either regionally or internationally, to stop the settlement expansion and settler activity in the occupied territories that is making the two-state solution and independence an even more distant dream.



Conclusion

For Palestinian youth to participate effectively in the politics of their country, they must overcome many obstacles, on both the internal and external levels. On the internal level, they have to face the monstrous corruption that is internalised and institutionalised in the PA's official bodies, while at the same time dealing with the parental control which affects their lives on all levels. Meanwhile, as part of Palestinian society, they need to address the issue of the split between Fatah and Hamas, while worrying about a dysfunctional legislative body, the weakness of the judicial system, and to some extent the lack of safety.

When it comes to external factors, Palestinian youth have to endure the discrimination of occupation, humiliation at checkpoints, and potentially life-threatening situations. Additionally, in some areas, they need to worry about how they can resist the Israeli settlers' repeated attacks, which aim to provoke the Palestinians and force the IDF to step in to protect the settlers (the area will then be declared a military zone, and afterwards handed over to the settlers). Scared for what might happen to their land, country, cause and to themselves, Palestinian youth live in a cruel situation where they are the fuel of any political or military confrontation between the two sides.

Palestinian youth are politically well educated and aware, and are in a constant learning process due to the fact that they know that what happens in the world in general, and in the region in particular, will at some level affect them. They are closely following the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the Israeli elections, the rising Iranian-Israeli tensions, the escalation in Gaza and many other hot issues around them, to make sure they are not caught by surprise.

Due to a change in their attitudes towards the Palestinian political factions, the Palestinian youth believe that elections are not the sole exemplification of democracy; they are widening their scope to include their right of representation in the PLC as well as other institutions within Palestinian governance. Youth are now talking about political participation, debate, democracy, human rights and political pluralism at a rising pace that has been attracting the attention of the political factions, despite the fact that these factions are not doing what they are supposed to do in such cases – but they are increasingly aware of the new political force that is boiling under the surface.

It is the youth's responsibility to improve their situation in Palestine; however, it is also necessary for governmental and non-governmental institutions to play a role in this regard. Their efforts must be exerted cooperatively and on three main levels to achieve this:

1. On the governmental level

The government consists of three main powers and institutions: legislative, judicial and executive. They are each responsible for improving the situation of the youth in Palestine.

Since the legislative institutions are responsible for passing laws that protect the citizens of the country, their role regarding youth empowerment lies in the following:

- a. Passing a suitable and a comprehensive law to protect the youth and their interests in society (a Palestinian Youth Law, similar to the Political Parties Law, Children's Law, etc.)

The suggested law would deal with issues of concern to the youth, such as assigning a certain quota for them in different Palestinian official and local institutions. Moreover, it should address the formation of a shadow parliament for youth, which would act as a counseling body to the leaders on both the local and national level concerning issues of youth.

- b. Lowering the age of candidacy in both the presidential and legislative elections, thus entitling younger Palestinian citizens to run for high official positions.

The Palestinian Basic Law states that the age of candidacy in the presidential elections is 40 years of age, while the age of candidacy for the legislative council elections is 28 years. There are two separate draft resolutions for lowering the age of candidacy in Palestine from 40 to 30 in the presidential election and from 28 to 25 in the legislative council elections.

- c. Reaffirming the Palestinian Basic Law's articles that protect the citizens of Palestine from being persecuted on the basis of their political and/or ideological views.

In the last 20 years, several incidents of human rights violations against Palestinians by their own government(s) have been documented, which contributed greatly to the current political and social situation in Palestine.²⁴

As far as executive institutions are concerned, changes in the organisational structure must be made, such as:

- a. Lowering the age of candidacy in the Palestinian Higher Council for Youth and Sports.

The key positions in the Council are held only by older members, while those who fall within the youth category have no tangible presence. A youth body or institution that

24 Amnesty International, 'Palestinian Authority: Human Rights Concern': <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/palestinian-authority>

is supposed to attend to youth issues and concerns is made up of old men, who because of the nature of the Palestinian political and social system have absolutely no meaningful contact with the youth. The age of candidacy in such institutions should be 35-40 years maximum (not 79, which is the age of the chairman of the Council, Munib Al Masri).

2. On the political parties level

The Palestinian political factions depend extensively on the youth to win local and national elections in Palestine, and it is the responsibility of these parties to reward young voters for their trust and loyalty. The political parties should attend to the following modifications:

- a. Raising the proportion of representation of youth in the political parties' institutions; there should be a 20 per cent minimum.

Having a certain percentage of youth representation in these parties will limit the absolute dominance of those historical leaders who, due to their seniority, gain the highest positions and so set the rules and policies in their parties. The need to highlight this point stems from the fact that involving the youth on different levels will enhance the general democratic process in the country, which will have significant implications for the general development process in the country.

- b. Developing the youth forums, syndicates and bodies inside these parties, so that the youth play a more significant role in decision-making.

The most important issue is building the capacity of the youth inside these bodies to guarantee that overlapping powers do not take place, as well as to guarantee independence in decision-making.

3. On the NGO level

The role of NGOs is complementary to the role of both the government and political parties. Their role in making sought-after changes lies in:

- a. Establishing a network that includes all the operating NGOs in Palestine, for cooperation.
- b. Mobilising the youth to pressure the government to implement these amended laws.
- c. Organising an annual youth conference, in cooperation with each other.
- d. Using a scientific method to determine youth concerns in the Palestinian community, and then attending to them through their projects.



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