Student activism has been a route into politics for Israel’s Palestinian citizens since the 1970s after military rule over Palestinian Arabs living in Israel ended in 1966. Most established politicians and Members of Knesset representing this group have been active in the Arab Student Committees at one of the four main universities in Israel, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, Ben Gurion University and Haifa University. By studying the Palestinian student body at Israeli universities one can learn about the current socio-political developments among this national minority generally and, because student politics tends to be ahead of general politics, also about future trends of this community. Until 2008 Palestinian student politics, as politics generally among Palestinian citizens, was dominated by secular nationalist and communist parties. Then, in 2008, the student groups of the Islamic Movement in Israel participated in elections to the Arab Student Committees and surprisingly won the elections at three of the main universities (they did not stand for election at Ben Gurion University). Though difficult to assess in exact numbers, it is fair to say that the Islamic Movement in Israel today is supported by about half or more of Muslim Palestinians in Israel, who make up 80 percent of this national minority that constitutes 20 percent of the Israeli population (over 1,000,000). What does this Islamist victory tell us about the current socio-political changes among the youth and the larger Palestinian community inside Israel? The present report investigates this query based on in-depth interviews with Islamist student activists from 2008-2012.

The Islamic Movement in Israel

The Islamic Movement in Israel was established in the late 1970s and has steadily expanded its country-wide grassroots activism focusing on religious education and social services. It began participating in local elections in Palestinian-dominated municipalities in Israel from the early 1980s. The Movement’s goals focus on protecting Palestinian land, people and religious sites. It operates an extensive network of socio-religious organisations offering much-needed services for this discriminated and neglected population, including kindergartens, after-school activities, social and sports clubs, health clinics, and libraries. It also facilitates necessary infrastructure (such as tarmac roads, school buildings and water supplies). In practice it functions through a network of interconnected local centres with a clearly defined religious-political leadership.

Secular Parties Losing Ground to Islamism

1 The term ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’ is used to describe Arab Palestinians living inside Israel (excluding the approximately 217,000 Palestinians inhabiting the occupied East Jerusalem), since this is the term preferred by my sources. The Israeli government and Hebrew media generally use the terms ‘Arabs’ and ‘Israelis’ and ‘Israeli Arabs’ to describe Palestinian citizens of Israel.
Since the 1970s secular nationalist and communist parties have dominated the political scene among Palestinian citizens of Israel. Recently, however, they have been challenged by the Islamic Movement in Israel. Especially since the violent outbreak of the second Intifada in October 2000, when thirteen Palestinian citizens of Israel were shot dead by Israeli police, the Islamic Movement has been at the forefront in criticism of Israeli policies and conduct. Its leaders are very visible, heading what they consider to be the Muslim and Palestinian battle for the occupied al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and participating in the flotillas to Gaza.

Similarly, the Islamist student activists are increasingly dominating the political scene at the universities. This is a testimony that it appeals to the assertive new sociological generation of Palestinian citizens of Israel, born in the last quarter of the 20th century, whom Dan Rubinowitch and Khawla Abu-Baker have called the Stand-Tall Generation. Different from earlier generations of Palestinians living in Israel who in general were more ambivalent with regards to their identity or too scared to articulate it, this generation is confident, clear and loud in its demands for a state for all its citizens. They boldly identify with their Palestinian identity and discard affiliation with Israel5. However, since the mid 2000s many have expressed disappointment with the predominantly secular leaders of the Stand-Tall Generation and their limited actual influence. Critics have argued that they have since lost their focus; have reverted to focus on their own personal lives; and have become more interested in consumerism and TV reality shows than politics6.

Significantly, this criticism does not fit the level of activism and ascend of the Islamic Movement among this generation and the Islamist student groups are currently taking the lead of this generation with their increasing success and unabated level of activism. Among Palestinian students the increasing popularity of the Islamic Movement became evident in the surprise victory of its student group in elections to the Arab Student Council at three of the four Israeli universities in 2008. According to the Islamist student activists interviewed for this research, their victory was due to the continuous and broad support they provide to Palestinian students throughout the year. Such as; assisting new students in their first meeting with the university campus and system; helping with the Hebrew language (in which all courses are taught); assisting students in finding accommodation; and providing financial support. This approach of local and uninterrupted support is similar to the general methodology of the Islamic Movement, with its network of country-wide organisations offering needed services to its constituency. The Islamists criticised the other parties for only focusing on elections and not providing practical support for students.

In addition, the Islamist student groups offer a more meaningful socio-religious framework where students can express and interact with their cultural and religious identity in a university atmosphere that is generally dominated by Jewish-Israeli-Hebrew culture. This is an indication of the increasing social and political gaps between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis and of the latter’s lost hope in an equal society (as advocated by the communists) and in the prospects of a ‘state for all its citizens’ (as advocated by the nationalists).

The Arab Spring Inspires

My interviewees among the students all expressed a strong sense of solidarity with the demonstrators across the Arab world since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring and described being inspired by their courage and success. Their interpretation of the events is both religious and political. In their religious interpretation the revolutions across the Arab world are the first steps towards the (Muslim) liberation of Jerusalem/al-Aqsa. According to their interpretation of the scriptures they are still waiting for the land and people of Palestine to be freed. The students see current events as sign that the process of liberation of Palestine has begun, though emphasized that they do now know when or how this will happen. The political interpretation is also related to the liberation of Jerusalem/al-Aqsa. According to the interview conducted in February 2012 expressed hope that the newly democratically elected leaders will reflect the will of their people and therefore come to the rescue of Palestine (different from the behavior of what they consider the corrupt and dictatorial former Arab leaders).

Most also added a concern about the then upcoming elections in the liberated states and hoped they would be fair and that if the Islamists won, that they would rule according to the law and not jeopardize this opportunity in any way. If Islamists leaders misuse their powers and fail to act democratically, they feared this would not only harm the specific country, but all Islamists in the region, as well as the process of liberation for Palestine.

In general, the students described what they consider to be a new political and military balance of power in the region that will finally liberate Palestine. Simultaneously these students explained that change cannot come from (Jewish) Israel and has to be imposed from outside and that only the new Arab states will make this happen. They did not talk about violent protests or liberation and when prompted said they hope it will not come to violence, but that they could not foresee the future or rule out any means that might be used. Most students spoke about the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and the Muslim democracy of Turkey as their ideal state.

Sum Up: New Trends

The Islamist electoral victory and ascend among Palestinian students at Israeli universities teach us that several important lessons about the Palestinian national minority in Israel:

1) That the Islamists are taking over, or at least posing a serious challenge, on the political scene among Palestinian citizens in Israel that until recently was dominated by secular parties and groups;

2) Their popularity is a testimony to the success of their methodology combining continuous grassroots activism with a strong religious, national and anti-occupation stance and rhetoric;

3) The students interviewed represent the new generation of leaders of this national minority, individuals who were brought up inside or alongside the Islamic Movement in Israel and are now becoming politically active, as evidences by the student activists, and they are, as their secular peers, part of the confident, unambiguous and forceful Stand Tall Generation of Palestinians in Israel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Israel:

Take measures in order in order to avoid further isolation of this group and the constituency it represents in general, and in particular with regards to future negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians:

- To interact with the Islamic Movement at all levels by establishing connections with local and national leaders of the Movement;
- Possess and display awareness of the pre-dicament of the history and predicament of Palestinian citizens of Israel, including their current socio-economic and political challenging in the face of an increasingly right-wing Israeli government and general Jewish population;
- Show the same type of openness towards this Islamist Movement as Norway has towards Hamas, thus awarding the Islamic Movement legitimacy as representative of its constituency.

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1) Ibid 11.
2) Ibid 128.
3) Ibid 10.
4) Ibid 545.
5) Ibid 258.
6) Ibid 262.
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Similarly, the Islamist student activists are increasingly dominating the political scene at the universities. This is a testimony that it appears to the assertive new sociological gen-eration of Palestinian citizens of Israel, born in the last quarter of the 20th century, whom Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu-Baker have called the Stand-Tall Generation. Different from earlier generations of Palestinians living in Israel who in general were more ambivalent with regards to their identity or too scared to articulate it, this generation is confident, clear and loud in its demands for a state for all its citizens. They boldly identify with their Pales-tinian identity and discard affiliation with Israel3. However, since the mid 2000s many have expressed disappointment with the predominantly secular leaders of the Stand-Tall Generation and their limited actual influ-ence. Critics have argued that they have since lost their focus; have reverted to focus on their own personal lives; and have become more in-terested in consumerism and TV reality shows than politics4.

Significantly, this criticism does not fit the level of activism and ascend of the Islamic Movement among this generation and the Is-lamist student groups are currently taking the lead of this generation with their increasing success and unabated level of activism. Among Palestinian students the increasing popularity of the Islamic Movement has begun, though emphasized that they do not talk about violent protests or liberation, but all Islamists in the region, as well as the Islamist student activists, and are now becoming politically active, as evidenced by the student activists, and they are, as their secular peers, part of the confi-dent, unambiguous and forceful Stand Tall Generation of Palestinian citizens in Israel.

**Recommendations**

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