Youth and popular protest in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

By Jacob Høigilt, Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies

Why did the Palestinian attempts at mass mobilization against internal splits and Israeli occupation fail in 2011, and what do they tell us about current youth activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Youth played a major role in the rebellions in the Arab world in 2011. Young people were central to the revolutionary efforts not only in Tunisia, but also in Egypt, Yemen and Syria, all of which are now in a process of profound political change. However, in the one place where a youth revolt would seem likely to occur – the Occupied Palestinian Territories – there was no sustained revolt. Instead, the March 15 movement, which was largely organized by youth and which succeeded in bringing thousands into the streets of Gaza and the West Bank to protest the split between Fatah and Hamas, apparently died down quietly.

Why? In seeking to answer this question, one should not draw comparisons with the ‘Arab Springs’ in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere. The Palestinian case is unique, since the people do not want the fall of a regime, but the end of an occupation by a foreign state, Israel. Therefore, it is more fitting to compare the current political situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the political conditions shortly before the previous intifadas – those of 1987 and 2000 – in order to make sense of the youth movement’s current difficulties in mobilizing for political protest.

The legacy of the intifadas

A central part of the context before the 1987 intifada broke out was the combination of Israel’s “stick-without-carrot” policies and a sense of standstill and loss of direction in the political process. There was no meaningful political process at the time, partly as a result of the PLO being in disarray. In addition, the Likud government was pursuing an active settlement policy at the time, establishing between ten and nineteen new settlements each year from 1977-1984. This coincided with economic difficulties and policies in Israel that led to economic depression and blocked industrialization in the Occupied Territories.

In this context, a network of local grassroots activists, often led by young people, seized the political initiative from the paralyzed Palestinian political elite. These new networks were characterized by their non-violent tactics, direct democratic decision-making, absence of ideological squabbles and a high capacity for adaptation, all of which made it difficult for the Israeli occupying power to deal with the uprising.

The Oslo accords of 1993 and the advent of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 changed all that. There now was a Palestinian elite in power that was for a large part made up of politicians formerly in exile, and not of the young guard who had been on the streets during the intifada. The new elite had a vested interest in the self-government arrangement and institutions, and felt the need to le-
gitize itself to ordinary Palestinians in the deteriorating conditions of the late 1990s. Consequently, the prelude to the 2000 intifada was a war of words and escalating military threats between the Palestinian and Israeli elites, and the intifada itself was very much an elite-driven incident, despite the existence of youths in the streets. As a consequence of this shift, the 2000 intifada was also characterized by violence, whereas the first intifada had been mostly non-violent.

Several aspects of today’s situation are strikingly similar to that preceding the 1987 intifada. Settlement activity has intensified, and the economic conditions in both Gaza and the West Bank are dire, despite the celebrated attempts of West Bank Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to build institutions and improve the economy. There is no political process between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and Israel has not explicitly defined any goals with its current occupation and settlement policy. There is also a big youth population in the OPT, youngsters with few prospects and much to be angry about.

Palestinian authoritarianism and the challenge from the youth

Developments on the internal Palestinian scene, however, have not been conducive to increased political activism and protest at all, especially not to independent youth initiatives. First, the PNA is accused of being authoritarian and corrupt. To be recognized by Israel and by donor countries as a legitimate political counterpart, the PNA must maintain security and prevent terror attacks and instability in the OPT; as a result, the Palestinian police and security forces are frequently involved in violent crackdowns on various groups that are seen to pose a challenge to the PNA, to Israel, or both. Second, factionalism in the OPT has increased to the point where Hamas and Fatah became engaged in a civil war-like struggle in 2007 that ended with Hamas taking control over the Gaza Strip and Fatah securing control over the West Bank. Since then, the two entities have become isolated from each other, run by two state-like apparatuses that both have displayed a will to violently suppress dissent. Authoritarianism is arguably more well-developed in Gaza than in the West Bank.

Thus, the youth who initiated the March 15 movement, and indeed any political organization that wants to revive the Palestinian political dynamics, has to fight not only against an occupier, but also against two quasi-governments in the West Bank and Gaza. These regimes purport to represent the Palestinian people, but are not capable of or willing to initiate policies that could jeopardize their privileged positions, and they accept no challenges to their policies.

This movement was central to the March 15 efforts, but it is active on other fronts as well. While the 15 March movement addressed the split between Hamas and Fatah, these youths, represented first and foremost by the loose organization or network al-Harak al-Shababi al-Mustaqbil (the independent youth movement), regularly take part in demonstrations and marches against Israeli occupation. This movement viciously opposes normalization with the occupier, and rejects international assistance when it deems it to be politically compromised (one recent placard at a demonstration read ‘USAID go to hell’). The movement’s explicit aim is to end the internal Palestinian split, revive the comatose Palestinian National Council and renew the resistance struggle in a way that takes into account and unites all Palestinians, including the refugees and the Palestinian Citizens of Israel, who are experiencing ever worsening political conditions inside Israel.

These aims set the movement squarely against not only Israel, but also Fatah and Hamas. Hence the difficulties in mobilizing: The established Palestinian political actors are against it, and it is harder to mobilize people to protest against both an occupation and internal oppression than just an occupation.

Reviving the spirit of 1987?

The independent youth movement has two advantages, however, that make it an interesting challenger despite its weak position. First, its grassroots organization, non-violent tactic and uncompromising stance against the occupation hark back to the youth movement that ignited the 1987 intifada, and this bottom-up approach succeeds in galvanizing popular opinion. This has been apparent during 2012, in the hunger strikes of Palestinians in Israeli detention, and in the protests against the harsh living conditions in the West Bank. Both were strong critical statements against Israel’s occupation and the PNA’s policies alike. As one activist said of hunger striker Khader Adnan (34):

So during the protests and demonstrations to support Khader Adnan, all the youth from all political parties, they were in front of Ofer [prison] to support him, because they saw him as a leader. [PA negotiator] Saeb Erekat is not a leader for the Palestinians.

Second, the independent youth movement actively builds alliances and loose networks across borders, with other Palestinian activists and with an international body of activists. In this way, they build a cross-factional network that is able to leverage tactics like the now well-known Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the Israeli state. 2012 is not 1987. It is uncertain if the youth movement will be able to challenge the iron grip of the Israeli occupation, and it remains to be seen how resilient Fatah and Hamas are in the face of popular discontent of which the March 15 movement and the recent demonstrations in the West Bank are clear signs. The current youth movement, however, displays a determination, clear-headedness and independence that has not been seen in the OPT since the 1980s, and it is therefore worth paying close attention to it in the future.

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There are, however, some interesting signs of change in this bleak picture. A self-assertive youth movement that is closely connected to a revival of popular non-violent resistance is currently emerging.

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