Islamist Student Politics in Israel

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Executive summary:

Student politics has been a route into politics for Israel’s Palestinian citizens since the 1970s, after the Military Rule of Palestinian Arabs living in Israel ended in 1966. Most established politicians representing this group have been active in the Arab Student Councils at one of the four main universities in Israel. What goes on among the students can tell us about future trends in the Palestinians community. Until 2008, this political stage was dominated by the secular nationalist and communist parties. Then, in 2008, the student groups of the Islamic Movement in Israel participated in elections to the Arab Student Councils and one of them surprisingly won the elections at the three main universities in Israel – Haifa University, Tel Aviv University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Based on in-depth interviews with Islamist student activists from 2008-2012, the present article examines the Islamic Movement’s entry into the centre stage of student politics and investigates the focus and methodologies of the Islamist student groups. In addition, it assesses the impact of the so-called Arab Spring and recent regional changes on these student activists.
On the 16th of July 2008, the Arab Student Council at Haifa University held elections. At the entrance to the lobby of the library building, hijab-wearing young women wearing green and white banners with Arabic writing were handing out leaflets about the Islamic Movement student groups, *Iqra* (read) and *al-Kalam* (the pen). Further into the lobby, male students were handing out T-shirts with the groups’ slogans: ‘al-Kalam Student Movement – Faith, Knowledge and Work’, ‘Al-Kalam: Homeland and Identity – Heavenly Message’, and *Iqra* [read] so that the path of change can continue – Faith, Knowledge and Work’. Male and female students manned the tables representing the youth groups belonging to the Islamic Movement. Discussions with on-looking and interested Palestinian students were lively and almost exclusively conducted in Arabic. That same day, the remains of the two Israeli soldiers who had been seized by Hezbollah in July 2006 were returned to Israel. At the other end of the same lobby, Jewish students were lighting candles in memory of the two soldiers. The candles were placed at a table under large posters with photos of the soldiers and with blessings for them in Hebrew. The Hebrew music playing consisted of songs written for and associated with loss and tragedy.

The victory of the Islamic Movement group in these elections, as well the ensuing victory of the Islamists in the elections at the other two main universities, Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, came as a shock to everyone, especially as this was the first time this group participated in these elections. The young Islamists were themselves surprised by the results; the secular Palestinian student groups, which until 2008 had dominated Palestinians student politics in Israel, were disappointed over their loss; and Jewish students and university staff were alarmed by the results.1

*Iqra*’s victory illustrates the general growing political and social power of the Movement, especially in that ‘the Palestinian student body on Israeli campuses is a microcosm representing future trends in the Palestinian community’.2 Since the 1970s, student politics has been described as a ‘breeding ground and a stepping stone to national political involvement’3 for this indigenous minority. For the current student generation, university has been described as the ‘singular meaningful arena for the quests and challenges that define their place within the Palestinian fold and Israel at large’.4 Therefore the present article argues that the current popularity of the Islamic Movement among the young generation is a testimony that it appeals to the assertive new sociological generation of Palestinian citizens of Israel5 born in the last quarter of the 20th century, whom Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker have called the Stand-Tall Generation.

The Stand-Tall label is taken from a song by Samih al-Qasem entitled *Muntasib al-Qama* (The Standing Tall) that ‘celebrates the tenacity, endurance, and resolve of Palestinians against all odds’.6 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 national identity and discard affiliation with Israel.7 The final turning point for this current youth generation came in October 2000 when thirteen Palestinian citizens were killed by Israeli police in demonstration in support of the clashes that began the Intifadat al-Aqsa.8 Though of course not uniform in their views on the end-solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or in their political approach, members of this generation across political and religious groups demand equal rights from the state and the right to preserve and develop their natural affiliation with the Palestinian people.

However, since the mid 2000s, many have expressed disappointment with the Stand-Tall Generation and its limited actual influence. Critics of the mostly secular representatives who headed and were involved in the initial demonstrations and events associated with this generation have argued that it has since lost its focus: activists have reverted to focusing on their own personal lives and consumerism and TV reality shows seem to have become more attractive than activism.9 Significantly, this criticism cannot be made of the level of activism and ascent of the Islamic Movement among this generation – in fact it seems that the Islamist student groups are currently taking the lead in this generation with their increasing success and unabated level of activism.

Based on in-depth interviews with Islamist student activists from 2008-2012, the present article examines the Islamic Movement’s entry onto the centre stage of student politics and investigates the focus and methodologies of the Islamist student groups. It asks why and how Islamist student activists got involved in student politics and it assesses the impact of the so-called Arab Spring and recent regional changes on these student activists.
Palestinian Student Politics in Israel

Student politics as we know it in Europe, and also among Jewish Israeli students, generally focuses on issues of direct concern to students, such as tuition fees, campus facilities and the quality of teaching. Palestinian student politics in Israel has much the same focus as general Palestinian politics in Israel. This is similar to student politics in (formerly) colonised countries where independence and national goals are in focus. Specifically, the focus in Palestinian student politics at Israeli campuses are equal rights and national and religious freedom as Palestinian Arab Christian and Muslim citizens in the Jewish state. Similar to other student groups in countries where democratic rights and freedoms are not granted, they challenge the status quo with their critical discourse and focus on universal values and language.

Mohaned Mustafa divides Palestinian student activism in Israel into four historical stages: the initial stage extends from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, when Palestinians citizens were severely restricted by the limitations imposed by military rule. The paradoxical predicament of Palestinian citizens of Israel lies in the vacuum between Israeli citizenship and Palestinian national belonging: although formally granted citizenship in 1948 and given the right to vote and to be elected to the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), they are excluded from equal membership in the political community as non-Jewish citizens of a state which accords Jewish citizens with privileged rights and status. The military rule of Palestinian citizens until 1966 was made up of three interacting processes: segmentation, dependence and cooptation, and involved a system of informers and collaborators from the Arab community. Restrictions involved physical confinement; an extensive permit regime (for travel, work, construction, family reunification and more); further land confiscation and living under the constant eye of the internal security services (Shabak). Like political activities in general for this generation, the focus of Palestinian student activities at universities related to the oppressive rule and the practical, financial and future concerns of the students. The immediate concern of this fragmented and damaged Palestinian minority at this time was survival. The political stage was dominated by the Communist Party, the National Front for Peace and Equality (al-jabah al-dimuqrati li salam wa musawa), a position it held until the 1980s:

The Communist Party is the most important party for Arab citizens of Israel. In the 1970s and 1980s it played the key role in developing their consciousness and positions. It was the central political force active among Arabs in Israel in general which demanded a solution of the Palestinian problem in the guise of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, but also demanded equality for the Arabs in Israel.

The second stage of Palestinian student politics in Israel runs from the middle of the 1970s to the mid-1980s. This is when their activities developed into an organised movement with a political national and social agenda. It was in this period the first Arab Student Committees (later also called Arab Student Councils) were established because the groups representing Palestinian students did not wish to join the general Israeli-dominated student union. The first Committee was initiated by the nationalist parties al-Ard (the Land) and Abna al-Balad (Sons of the County) who offered the first political alternative to the Communist Party. The student committees are to this day not recognised by the university administrations as formal representatives of the Palestinian students, however, in practice the administrations do meet and have dialogue with representatives of these committees. In this period the number of Palestinian students at Israeli universities increased and issues of concern were related to security and social exclusion, such as the refusal to act as guards at the Hebrew University pitted against Palestinian guerrilla fighters from the occupied territories; the refusal of Jewish home owners to rent to Palestinian students; and police harassment in student homes. According to Ilan Pappe, the university campus was the main locus for political happenings among Palestinian citizens in this period and they routinely held demonstrations against the occupation and in solidarity with the PLO. These demonstrations were either prohibited by the university administration or, if allowed, the organisers were nevertheless punished with arrests and house curfews which damaged their ability to continue and finish their education.

The third stage in the development of Palestinians student activism in Israel started in the middle of the 1980s, extends to the late 1990s and is described by Mustafa as one of recession and stagnation. This was due to the combination of internal problems in the Palestinian student movement in Israel and external political developments, such as the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan, the Lebanon War and the Oslo Accords.
According to Mustafa, the fourth stage from the late 1990s until today has brought reorganisation and reactivation of the student movement and the emergence of new student groups representing both nationalist and Islamist groups. This latter period is also characterised by an increase in higher education among Palestinian citizens of Israel in general and of female Palestinian students in particular. Today, approximately 20 percent of the Israeli population is not Jewish, but indigenous Arab Palestinian. According to official data, at present, Muslim Palestinians (excluding the Druze) constitute approximately eighty percent of the 1.5 million Palestinians in Israel (the rest are Christians and Druze, about ten percent each). The overwhelming majority of Muslim Palestinians (in Israel and elsewhere) are Sunni.

As mentioned above, until recently Palestinian student activism at Israeli universities has been dominated by secular nationalist or communist groups, as has the national political scene for Palestinians in Israel. These student groups operate in close ties with their respective mother parties: the National Democratic Assembly (al-tajammu al-watani al-dimuqrati, Arabic/Balad, Hebrew acronym) and the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality. The former rejects the Jewish nature of the Israeli state and calls for a state for all its citizens while emphasising the Palestinian Arab identity of its constituency, whereas the latter calls for a secular democratic state that encompasses both Jewish and Arab (Palestinian) identity.

The Islamic Movement Enters Student Politics

With the entry into student politics of the student groups belonging to the Islamic Movement, a Muslim religious character was added to the national and civic focus of the other parties. The Islamist student groups work to spread Islam through education among its constituency, in addition to improving the socio-economic-political predicament of Palestinian students. As such, they are similar to the moderate Islamist student groups in Egypt in the 1970s. However, as will become evident below, it is important to emphasise that the Islamist student groups in Israel are also overtly Palestinian Arab in their goals, methodology and identity.

The late arrival of the Islamic Movement onto the student stage reflects its somewhat late entry into Palestinian politics, generally due to its historical trajectory: the Movement was established by shaykhs educated in West Bank religious institutions after the 1967 war who entered the local political field from the mid 1980s. Some have argued that the Movement’s late arrival in student politics is a result of a general failure to attract intellectual circles. The argument is that the religiously educated Islamist leaders did not appeal to students in the same manner as the leaders of the other Palestinian political parties who by and large are educated at Israeli universities. Some of the shaykhs have admitted to failing to attract academics and others at universities and beyond. However, today this observation seems to be a thing of the past, considering the recent success of the Islamist student groups, which indicates that the Islamic Movement is more than capable of attracting the new generation of intellectuals.

Before further examining the history and current activism of the student groups belonging to the Islamic Movement, it is important to explain why there are two such groups. The Movement split in 1996 over disagreement over whether or not to participate in national elections to the Knesset. Since then the Movement has had two branches, the so-called Northern branch, headed by Shaykh Ra’ed Salah, that refuses to partake in national elections, and the so-called Southern branch, currently headed by Hammad Abu Daabes, that has participated in national elections and has had representatives in the Knesset since 1996. The split of the Movement resulted in what can be described as two mirror movements with equal goals and methodology, except on the issue of national elections. Therefore there are two student groups – Iqra, which belongs to the Northern branch, and al-Kalam, which belongs to the Southern branch. All leaders and activists interviewed for my research of this Movement emphasise the commonness and solidarity between the two branches, and stress that the split should not be over-emphasised, although admitting it reflects different views on an important issue and has resulted in significant practical consequences. The branches have worked towards reunification for many years and rumours have it that this might happen sooner rather than later.

Ibrahim Hijazi, the manager of al-Kalam, the student association of the Southern branch, explained that before the split of the Islamic Movement all its students were represented under the name of the Arab Student Affairs Committee, and that the belated split of student activities into al-Kalam and Iqra occurred only in 2000. The situation at the Hebrew University in Je-
rusalem took a different trajectory and there all Islamist students were, until 2008, represented by the group called al-Risala. In 2008, Iqra split from al-Risala and formed its own group also there.

According to the manager of Iqra student association of the Northern branch, Muhammad Farhan, this association began its work at Haifa University in 1999. The original activities focused on providing students with grants and a few events of a socio-religious character. He explained that until 2002, the focus was on establishing student groups and activities at individual universities. In 2002, Iqra’s Student Administration was established, consisting of current and former students who coordinate activities for students. Farhan recalled that the group participated in elections for the Arab student Committees at Ben Gurion University, securing two out of nine seats. He has managed Iqra since 2004 and has overseen the establishment, growth and institutionalisation of a country-wide network of student groups, as well as programmes to motivate high school pupils to continue their education and assist them in the application process for university.

Both student associations are part of the larger body of their respective mother branches of the Islamic Movement and their activities focus both on pupils who aim to study at university level and on students at university. The mother movements sponsor the student activities. This is similar to the other student groups, both those belonging to the nationalist and the communist parties, who operate in close connection with their mother parties. The activism of Iqra and al-Kalam before university level focuses on assisting pupils in choosing the right study path and on preparing them for the tests they are required to pass in order to be admitted to university.

There are two separate state school systems in Israel – one for Jewish students and one for Arab Palestinian students. The Jewish schools are sub-divided into secular, national religious and ultra-orthodox schools, but there is no sub-division of Arab schools. According to Isamel Abu-Saad, the separation of Jewish and Arab pupils appears to show appreciation for the linguistic and cultural differences between these groups, however he argues that in fact it exists in order to serve the interests of the dominant Jewish group and simultaneously as a means by which to control the Arab population. He argues that this separation enables the state to discriminate against the Arab schools and to more actively control both the material taught and the employees working in these schools. Until today, the main problems experienced by Palestinian pupils since the first decades of the state have remained more or less the same: they are under-resourced and suffer from poor quality teaching, resulting in a low level of education that consequently provides Palestinian citizens few opportunities in life.

Consequently, when compared with their Jewish counterparts, Palestinians pupils perform comparatively poorly in school: Palestinian pupils drop out from high school at nearly twice the rate of their Jewish peers and approximately 31 percent of Palestinian pupils drop out of high school as compared to 16 percent of Jewish pupils. A Human Rights Watch report published in 2001 describes the state education system for Palestinians in Israel in these terms:

The hurdles Arab students face from kindergarten to university functions like a series of sieves with sequentially finer holes. At each stage, the education system filters out a higher proportion of Palestinian Arabs students than Jewish students.

Due to the flaws in the education system for Palestinians citizens, as outlined above, out of the number of Palestinian students who attempt to enrol in university only about 30 percent of candidates pass the compulsory psychometric matriculation exam, whereas the pass rate is 46.8 percent for Jewish candidates. According to Abu-Saad:

At the point that the Palestinian Arab educational system merges with the Jewish system, the psychometric exam serves as a gatekeeper, barring Palestinian students from admittance or from entry into the field of their choice because they ‘are not good enough’, or ‘not as good as’ their Jewish counterparts.

Iqra’s head of orientation for high school pupils explained that beyond this test, Palestinians have more difficulties in the application process when compared with Jewish student candidates, as the latter generally have the advantage of being more experienced when applying to university. This is due to a combination of reasons: Jewish candidates have the experiences of two (for female) and three (for male) years of military training and are therefore older than their Palestinian
counterparts. In addition, Jewish candidates have usually also had a gap year travelling abroad before they apply, whereas Palestinian students come straight from high school. Furthermore, he argues that Jewish students are more versed in Western culture when compared to the younger Palestinian pupils, who by and large come from more traditional communities in villages, which are less urban (this is especially relevant for female candidates). Last but not least, Palestinian students have to take these tests in Hebrew, which for Palestinians is only a language taught in school, whereas for Jewish students Hebrew is their mother tongue.

In addition to assisting pupils in applying and getting into university, another focus is on assisting pupils in choosing a suitable topic of study. The director of student activities in al-Kalam, Daud Afahrem, explained that they have a booklet, now issued for the third time, entitled ‘In the right direction – choosing a future career’ that is written with the aim of assisting pupils in their educational choice. According to Afahrem, almost 60 percent of Palestinians students either leave university or change their major (i.e. their main area of study) after the first year of study. This is costly both financially and in terms of time. In order to avoid this trajectory, in addition to distributing the booklet, he and others from al-Kalam visit high schools around the country and give lectures on how to choose what to study.

Islamist Student Activism at Israeli Campuses Explained

In the following sections, the focus will be on the reasons behind the choice to become active in Islamist student politics and on what activists do, based on interviews conducted with student activists and other activists in the Islamic Movement.

Demonstrating the connections between the Iqra and al-Kalam’s activities on the local and university level, many student activists interviewed described their current student activism as a continuation of their contact with activism and student associations in villages prior to university. These students typically come from religious families and were part of the local Iqra or al-Kalam group as youngsters and consider their student activism as a natural continuation of this. As expressed by one male activist:

Before I came to the university, I took part in its [Iqra’s] activities at a local level. In my town, they organized events sponsored by the Islamic Movement and we used to take part in camps, trips, volunteer activities, and other things, and then we came to the university and we already knew them [Iqra] and we joined them.

Other student activists interviewed said that having family members who were active in the Islamic Movement, which made it natural for them to join one of the two Islamist student groups. This is not to say that these activists blindly followed in their family’s path without questioning the way and the method. As illustrated by one male student whose uncle is Shaykh Abdallah Nimr Darwish, the founder of the Islamic Movement in Israel:

I was affected by them [my family] and naturally started as an activist for the Islamic Movement. Later, I reached a point where I wanted to stop and see if this is the right way or not. I started to search for other options in my life, better options for the reform, advancement and progress of society, and I found that the Islamic Movement is the right way.

Yet other student activists did not have any prior activism or familial relations with Iqra or Al-Kalam, but come from religious families and found it natural to join the Islamic Movement student groups at university. By way of illustration, both Farhan and Afahrem described joining their respective groups as being due to a combination of their religious background; their observations of the need for action for Palestinian students at Israeli universities; and the predicament of Palestinians in Israel and beyond (also based in their family history). Afahrem elaborated:

When I started [studying] I didn’t have any connection to politics, but unfortunately half of my family are in refugee camps in Lebanon, my uncles and my aunts are in Shatila refugee camp. One of my uncles and my grandfather were martyred, now I have two uncles and two aunts left, one uncle in Germany and one in Dubai and my aunts are still there. I studied structural engineering. Of course, I had clear Muslim tendencies previously [and] I joined Al-Kalam as a student member.

Farhan explained that his choice to become a student activist was based on his experiences as a student and his observations of the difficulties faced by Palestinians students at Israeli universities.
Practical Assistance

The practical assistance offered by both Islamist student groups start when new Palestinian students arrive at the university and activists from both Iqra and al-Kalam are on hand to welcome them, show them around campus and help them to get settled and familiarised with the environment. Even though all the activists are religious, they assist all new Palestinian students, irrespective of their faith or level of observance.

This support is particularly important in the first year of study, when Palestinian students have to cope with challenges brought on by the transition of moving from home, more often than not from a rural village, to university dorms in large cities dominated by Jewish Israelis and their culture. As illustrated by the two parallel events at Haifa University described in the introduction, the elections for the Arab Student Council (in Arabic) and the memorial for the soldiers (in Hebrew), for and by Palestinian and Jewish students respectively, there is a deep divide between Palestinian and Jewish Israeli students and citizens. According to Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker, the university campus is the first time most young Palestinian citizens have normal daily contact with Jewish Israelis and this encounter is made more difficult by the fact that Israeli university campuses make very few provisions for Palestinian students. They treat them mechanistically, reluctantly, like a host begrudgingly extending hospitality to an uninvited guest. This naturally further alienates the Palestinian students from the Jewish majority and Israeli society. Concrete issues mentioned by the students that cause difficulties are gender relations and dorm behaviour, such as Jewish girls having boyfriends in the dorms for girls and visa-versa; not enough prayer rooms (for Muslims); few halal options on campus and in nearby shops; and drinking and drugs in the dorms and on campus.

In addition to the socio-cultural challenges involved in going to university, Palestinian students have to rapidly improve their academic Hebrew that until now has been only a taught subject at school and not a practiced language for them. In interviews conducted for this research, many students emphasised that their lack of a sufficient level of Hebrew made it difficult to follow the lectures, keep up with the readings and resulted in them lacking the confidence to participate effectively in class. All these major hindrances result in low grades and loss of time when compared to their Jewish peers. In order to make the transition to Hebrew-based education easier, Iqra and al-Kalam student activists assist new students with Hebrew and with homework, especially during their first year of study.

According to two female student activists at Haifa University, Iqra offers free tutorials for first year students given by older students who in return receive a scholarship from the association. To pay for university tutors is costly and this system benefits both the new and the older students. A female al-Kalam activist at Hebrew University described another scholarship programme for university students in which they have to return to their village and provide 50-60 hours of tutoring for pupils. The purpose is two-fold: to inspire and assist pupils to enter higher education and to keep the students connected with their background.

Other financial support systems described by student activists involve buying library copy cards and meal tickets and reselling these at lower prices to the students. All these activities are funded by the Iqra and al-Kalam student associations who in turn are funded by the relevant branch of the Islamic Movement.

Developing Political, Religious and National Awareness

In addition to practical and financial assistance, both Iqra and al-Kalam place great emphasis on the development of political awareness and religious and Arab identity in their activities. The manager of Iqra, Farhan, explained that one of his early observations as a student was the need for political knowledge among the Arab students:

I also saw a need to raise the awareness of the Arab students and help them. There is a need to educate them politically, culturally and intellectually as members of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

According to two male activists at Hebrew University, a general problem when it comes to socio-political awareness among Palestinian students is that they are generally less active in social, cultural and political activities than their Jewish counterparts. The priority of the majority of Palestinian students is to study and take exams and in the process ‘[...] they forget who they are and they care only for themselves’. In order to stop and reverse this development, both Iqra and al-Kalam initiate a number of activities with different focuses and goals.
Iqra and al-Kalam student activists describe arranging a number of different activities with a religious focus. On an individual level, they have small meetings in dorms and other places that involve reading, recital and memorisation of the Qur’an and other religious sources. For large audiences, they arrange events such as lectures held by shaykhs from the Movement; film screenings; and trips to holy sites and in particular to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. While the small meetings usually are gender segregated, large events, such as film screenings, lectures and trips are not.

In addition to focusing on the religious aspect of their identity, student activists describe events that have the intention of improving the level of Arabic among students. After decades of mainly state education, in which Arabic has been a de-prioritised subject, combined with living in a state where Hebrew is the dominant language in all public spheres, including media and all state institutions, the level of modern standard and/or classical Arabic has decreased among this population. As mentioned earlier, Hebrew is the principal language of instruction at all higher education institutions in Israel. One student activist links the loss of Arabic with what to him is unwanted integration, saying that many Palestinians in Israel ‘have sacrificed the Arabic language and try to use Hebrew everywhere so that there will be integration’. A female activist links Arabic with religion, saying, ‘Protecting the Arabic language is also protecting Islam.’

Arabic-improving events facilitated by al-Kalam include poetry recitals and stand-up comedy shows.

Politically orientated activities consist of lectures by Islamic Movement leaders, academics and others who can shed light on the history and current predicament of Palestinians in Israel and beyond, as well as other relevant issues. For example, at Hebrew University, Iqra arranged a lecture on Arab history and Islamic heritage in al-Andalus; and al-Kalam activists described hosting a meeting with Palestinian members of the Knesset representing all Palestinian parties. The representatives talked about their work in the Knesset, presented their political ideas and talked about the roles of the students in Palestinian politics in Israel.

In addition, both student groups arrange regular trips to the Naqab/Negev to show solidarity with the Palestinians who live there in so-called ‘unrecognised villages’ under constant threat of house demolitions and evictions. Before the war in 1948, there were 105,000 Bedouins living in the Naqab/Negev, whereas after the war only 13,000 remained; the rest had been expelled or displaced. Of those who remained, the majority were moved to new areas of the desert by the government and the villages they built then, and where many of them still live, are these so-called unrecognised villages. According to Hassan Jabareen, the Director of Adalah:

An unrecognized village is a village built on land without a building permit and therefore everything on the land is illegal and in danger of demolition. It does not exist on the map, it has no official name, and therefore no infrastructure for water, electricity, schools or any other service, although the residents still pay taxes.

The Islamic Movement has a substantial following among these Palestinians and it is present on the ground, building needed facilities such as kindergartens, mosques, roads and more. In addition to solidarity trips, student activists from al-Kalam at the Hebrew University have arranged demonstrations on campus against the 2011 Prawer Plan for ‘mass expulsion of the Arab Bedouin community in the Naqab (Negev) desert’ with the participation of all Palestinian student groups.

The Islamist student groups also arrange demonstrations on a regular basis, often in cooperation with other students groups representing Palestinian students, in reaction to current events, such as the war on Gaza in 2009 and in solidarity with the Arab Spring. These demonstrations cause tensions between Palestinian and Jewish students and with the university administration, and there is often violence involved. Campus security is on site as are often the police, and it is not uncommon for Palestinian male students to be arrested and taken away for questioning. According to one student activist who was questioned by the police, the purpose was to intimidate and scare him and others in order to dissuade them from participating in demonstrations and in political activities generally.
As for relations with the university administration, most student activists interviewed describe that they follow the rules and always apply formally before arranging events and that they can never tell if their requests will be approved or not. In general they feel that it is much more difficult for Palestinian students to arrange events in comparison with Jewish student groups and that the rules for distributing leaflets and other political or cultural material are interpreted more leniently with regards to Jewish students. As explained by one student:

As for the university itself, you feel that they deal with the Arab students on a security basis in matters such as demonstrations, while they do not treat the Jewish students, even when they have unauthorized demonstrations, in the same manner.\textsuperscript{55}

When asked about their relations with Jewish students in general, most Islamist activists emphasise that in class they are colleagues and cooperative, sit next to each other and exchange material on a friendly basis. Beyond the classroom they do not have much contact. The collegial day-to-day interaction is disrupted in times of heightened political tension, such as the events of October 200, the Lebanon war in 2006, the war on Gaza in 2009, and the flotillas to Gaza in 2010. Especially after demonstrations when Palestinian and Jewish class peers are on opposite sides, they describe that the tension can be brought into the classroom and beyond. One female student who studies politics explained:

Even the lecturer himself may comment, maybe attack your religion. In addition, [when] you may want to say something and he stops you and kicks you out of the classroom ... In the end, you are obliged to be silent so it will not affect your studies.\textsuperscript{56}

Another student activist described how during the war on Gaza Jewish students stopped saying ‘Good morning’ and stopped talking to him and his Palestinian friends.

**Relations with other Palestinian Student Groups**

As mentioned above, large scale events are often coordinated with other Palestinian student groups, such as demonstrations and events marking the Nakba (the Catastrophe), which is what the Palestinians call the 1948 war and its consequences; and Land Day, which commemorates the collective struggle against land confiscation and dispossession experienced by Palestinian citizens of Israel. When I asked student activists from Iqra and al-Kalam about their relations with the other student groups, in general these seem to reflect the relationship between the Islamic Movement and the other political parties representing Palestinians in Israel. Both interviewees from the Islamic Movement and Palestinian politicians interviewed previously expressed that on what they called ‘external’ or ‘political’ issues regarding Palestinian citizens, they are in agreement and cooperate.\textsuperscript{57} However, they differ with regards to the relationship between religion and politics and on social issues, such as gender relations.

On the one hand, most student activists interviewed for this research emphasised that there is no negative competition or animosity between the different student groups and that, on the contrary, they participate in each others’ activities when this is natural; while on the other hand, they described problems with the social and practical organisation of the aforementioned types of events. For example, the non-Islamic students groups want social events not only to be gender mixed but also to have female speakers, which poses a challenge to the Islamist activists. Alcohol is another problem for the Islamists that the other student groups often want to include. The Islamist activists interviewed lamented the stubbornness of some secular activists on these issues that in their view obscured the larger issues they in fact agree on:

They focus on the things we differ on and forget that there are many issues in common between us.\textsuperscript{58}

Addressing the recent and surprising victory of Iqra in the student elections, several Iqra activists explained their success based on their continuous work to improve the situation of the Palestinian students compared with what they consider to be the ‘only at election time’ approach of the other groups. Based on their long and persistent work, Iqra activists argued that the students know and trust them, and have faith that they will be there, as will their services, also after election day. The implication was that this is not the case with secular groups.
On the problems of cooperation across political parties groups, several *Iqra* activists described experiencing that the other groups were dragging their feet and making things complicated as a reaction to *Iqra*’s success in the 2008 elections. *Iqra* suddenly headed the Arab Student Council at three of the four universities. Thus, any failure on behalf of the Council would reflect badly on *Iqra* and the implied accusation was that the other groups indirectly tried to make *Iqra* fail.

In addition to internal politics, the current developments in Syria have caused some friction between the Islamists, the nationalists and the communists. According to several Islamist student activists interviewed, the Democratic Front (*Jabha*) and individuals from the National Democratic Assembly (*Tajammu*) supported the Assad regime. They explained that the main reasons for this support were the anti-colonial and anti-Western stance of the regime. However, in light of the violent crack-down on the demonstrations in Syria, and as Muslims, they cannot tolerate this kind of behaviour from any ruler.

As for the relations between *Iqra* and *al-Kalam*, first of all, most student activists express sadness and frustration over the split in the Movement and said they would prefer a united Islamic Movement. Today’s students were children when the split occurred in 1996 and have therefore grown up with it. They know the cause of the split well and support their branch in terms of participation or not in elections for the parliament, however, when it comes to the student level of activities, and on a day-to-day basis, they do not think the split matters. Most Islamic-oriented students and activists go to activities arranged by both *Iqra* and *al-Kalam*, regardless of their affiliation. Also, individually, they describe the split as not an issue. Similar to leaders and activists in the mother Movement interviewed previously, they emphasised that they have more in common than not, and that they agree on the most important issues related to religion and the national cause of the Palestinians:

In actuality, we are the same, but we disagree on the [participation in the] Knesset… it is more trends and not Islamic thoughts or principles that we differ on...

Farhan, the manager of *Iqra*, explains further:

Working with two Islamic voices at the universities is uncomfortable for students … for the leaders [of the Movement] it may not be as difficult, but for the students it is very embarrassing while speaking to other students... they always try to hide it or find room for cooperation and participation. Showing the split is not acceptable to students and detrimental to the Islamic student work.

According to Farhan, this is the reason why at the university in Jerusalem the two branches worked together under the umbrella of *al-Risala* until as late as 2007. He also stressed that as the manger of *Iqra* he tries to coordinate with the manager of *al-Kalam*, Ibrahim Hijazi. Such cooperation is described as successful sometimes and less so at other times, depending on the issues. In interviews with leaders of the Northern branch in 2011, I was informed that the two branches are expected to reconcile and reunite soon and this was confirmed in interviews with the leaders of the Southern branch in 2012.

**The Influence of the Arab Spring**

Ibrahim Hijazi attributed new will for cooperation to the influence of the Arab Spring and said that it was exemplified by the fact that *al-Kalam* supported *Iqra* in the 2011 elections to the Arab Student Council:

It was because of the Arab Spring – the atmosphere, we have no excuse to say we cannot work together anymore. These are the feelings from the new situation – not just new situation, but the new balance of power. People like me, believers, have waited for this – we knew it would come; it was late, and surprising that it came from Tunisia, Egypt we would have expected, but not Tunisia. We had deep beliefs that something must happen, the star of Islam must rise up – how and when we did not know. Now it is clear how it began, but not how it will develop. It has cost a lot – this freedom. You ask how these events have touched us; look at the Islamic Movement in Egypt and Tunisia now – we knew it; we know people there. The people will continue this process and take our roles to different levels.
When I asked the student activists in *Iqra* and *al-Kalam* if and how they and their peers have been influenced by the Arab Spring and current developments in the region, they concurred with Hijazi that they were inspired by the atmosphere of the revolutions. One student replied:

I think that what is happening in the Arab world does have an impact here, there was a lot of empathy, and people were closely following what was happening in the Arab world, largely because, in my opinion, we are a part of them, the Arab world and the Muslim countries are part of us, even from an emotional closeness or closeness of identity.

They express being proud as Muslims and Arabs to see their fellow Arabs and co-religionists stand up against corrupt and cruel regimes. They describe the atmosphere among them this last year as one of solidarity with the revolutionaries and optimism. Since winter 2011 they have marched in solidarity in Israeli cities, arranged lectures by specialists to shed light on the recent events, held discussions groups on campus and via Facebook, and expressed their feelings of solidarity, hope and increased Arab-Muslim self-respect in poetry and other writings.

With a more local perspective, they said they felt good about the recent changes because they see them as a sign for the Zionist state that things can and will change also in Israel-Palestine. To them, the success of the protesters in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and hopefully in Syria, have proven that change is possible. These young Muslim student activists at Israeli universities believe that the change in Israel-Palestine is part of the divine plan – the belief that al-Quds and al-Aqsa will be freed (from Israeli occupation) is strong and deep. They see the revolutions as a sign that finally the region’s Muslims are rising to the task, albeit a little late from a Palestinian perspective.

The change that they are sure will come is described as due to the change of the corrupt Arab leadership who did not oppose Israel. Now that the people are to be properly represented by their governments, these students believe the new governments will no longer let Israel continue its occupation and discrimination in historic Palestine. The ‘power game’ has changed they said. Few thought, and no-one wished, it would come to actual violence, but the point was rather that now Israel cannot continue its politics without answering to the new regional reality of ‘real’ Muslim Arab rule which supports the Palestinians.

As Islamists, these students are naturally excited that the new governments are dominated by Islamists, however they are also nervous regarding the responsibility this means. From their perspective, finally moderate Islamists have a chance to prove to the world and themselves what they are good at – that they can run a country and be just. Yet, many students carefully added that this is a big test and if they fail it will be a disaster – for Islamic politics, for the people and for the region. To illustrate how they would like the new governments to act, they use the example of Erdogan and Turkey, which to them illustrates the right combination of religion and democracy.

To these Islamist student activists in Israel, the Arab Spring equalises freedom and Islam and thus shows Islam and Islamists in a rational and progressive light, which is important to them. Different from Islamists elsewhere in the region, they are used to being a minority in a non-Muslim state and thus are also used to encountering and countering negative stereotypes and images of Islam and Islamic politics.
Conclusion

The Palestinian student groups belonging to the Islamic Movement in Israel, similar to the groups representing the nationalist and communist Palestinians student groups in Israel, generally have the same focus and approach as their mother Movement. All student groups representing Palestinian citizens of Israel at Israeli universities fit the description of student groups that are part of the larger national struggle beyond the immediate concerns for the student population. Their main national concerns are equal rights as indigenous Arab Palestinians in the Jewish state. Similar to the secular student groups, the close relations with the mother Movement is evident in the financial and organisational support by the respective branches of the Islamic Movement. In addition, the Islamist student groups apply the same approach of continuous grassroots support as the mother Movement, which addresses practical concerns, political awareness and religious identity.

According to the student activists interviewed, it is precisely due to this sustained approach of support that Iqra won the elections to the Arab Student Council in 2008. They argue that students voted for them because they knew that they can deliver much-needed services and that they will continue to do so, and in-between elections. The implication of this comment is that the secular parties focus too much on political issues, do not assist the students practically and are mostly present during election campaigns. This observation is similar to the general response by Islamic Movement leaders and activists interviewed, who all identified the continuous practical and socio-religious support by the Movement as a key to its success, which distinguishes it from the other political parties representing Palestinians in Israel.

Reinforcing the importance of the support network of organisations of the Islamic Movement, the pupil-oriented activities of both Iqra and al-Kalam in Palestinian towns and villages across the country are a major reason why students get involved in the Islamic Movement’s student groups at the universities. So, apart from religious and political reasons, former knowledge of and contact with these organisations prior to university make them a natural choice for students to become active in at university.

Based on the examination of the types of activities the Islamic student groups engage in, it is evident that they are part of the politically aware and assertive Stand-Tall Generation, and what is more, with their recent election successes they have taken a leading role in this generation. Thus they have side-lined the nationalist and communist parties who until the mid-2000s dominated Palestinian student politics. This development is a reflection of the general trend of the increasing significance of the Islamic Movement among Palestinians in Israel and indeed, with the Arab Spring bringing Islamists into power in Egypt and elsewhere, this development can be said to be part of a regional shift. Certainly the revolutions in the neighbouring Arab countries have inspired the Muslim Palestinian youth in Israel and given them hope that soon their fellow Muslims and Arabs will come to the long-awaited and real rescue of Palestinian.
Endnotes

1. There are often confrontations between the student groups representing Palestinian students and Jewish student groups when the former arrange demonstrations in reaction to Israeli aggression in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or events to commemorate their national identity, see for example Raved, A., 14.11.2007, ‘Students clash on ‘Kaffiyah Day’, Ynet, (http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3471547,00.html, accessed 24.09.2012). As an indicator of how uncomfortable the university administration are with the presence of the Islamic Movement on campus, the leader of the Islamic Movement Shaykh Ra’ed Salah was banned from an event at Haifa University in September 2011 as ‘a likely danger to the public’. For details see Raved, A., 05.09.2011, ‘Islamic leader banned from Haifa Uni event’, Ynet.com (http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4066621,00.html, accessed 23.09.2012).


5. In this article, the term ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’ will be used to describe Arab Palestinians living inside Israel (excluding the approximately 170,000 Palestinian inhabitants of occupied East Jerusalem), since this is the term preferred by my sources. The Israeli government and Hebrew media generally use the terms ‘Arab Israelis’ and ‘Israeli Arabs’ to describe Palestinian citizens of Israel.


8. Ibid: 112.


13. It is important to qualify this with the fact that only less than half of the 150,000 who remained after the war in 1948 were granted citizenship then while the remainder waited to meet certain conditions as stipulated in the Nationality Law of 1952 and many were not granted citizenship before this law was amended in 1980 (Shafir, G., and Yoav Peled, 2002, Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship, Cambridge: Cambridge University: 111.


21. Ibid.


28. Ibid.


30. Interview, al-Kalam offices, Tamra, January 2012.

31. Interview, Iqra offices, Umm al-Fahm, February 2012.

32. There are also private schools in Israel, for both Jewish and Palestinian pupils, but the focus here is on state education.


34. Ibid.


38. For details see Relly Sa’ar, ‘Universities Return to Aptitude Exams to Keep Arabs Out,’ Ha’aretz (27 November 2003, accessed 20 April 2011).


40. Interview, Umm al-Fahm, February 2012.


42. Interviews, student activists, Tel Aviv University, March 2009.

43. Interview, Haifa University, February 2012.

44. Interview, Hebrew University, February 2012.

45. Interview, two females student activists, Haifa University, February 2012.

46. Interview, two male student activists, Hebrew University dorms, February 2012.

47. Interview, Haifa University, February 2012.

48. Interview, Hebrew University, February 2012.

49. Interview, two male student activists, Hebrew University dorms, February 2012

50. Interview, female activist, Hebrew University, February 2012.

51. Interview, two male student activists, Hebrew University dorms, February 2012.


54. Student activist, Haifa University, February 2012.

55. Interview, student activist, Haifa University, February 2012.

56. Interview, female student activist, Haifa University, February 2012.


58. Interview, female activist, Haifa University, February 2012.

60. Interview, Iqra female activist, Haifa University, February 2012.


62. Interview, Shaykh Safwat Freij, Kafr Qasim, February 2012.