The Palestinian Spring that Was Not: the Youth and Political Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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**Executive summary**

This report explains the political role of the Palestinian youth by comparing the period shortly before the First and Second Intifadas with the current situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). The immediate background for the comparison is the youth movement’s failure to achieve sustained popular mobilization in spring 2011, despite the revolutionary atmosphere at the time. The purpose of the comparison is to critically interrogate the oft-repeated assertion that the Palestinian youth are characterized by political anomie. Going beyond the specific case of the 15 March movement, I argue that the political developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territories have made it steadily more difficult for young activists to mobilize since 1987.

The political role of the youth in the OPT is constrained by three factors: Israeli occupation, oppression by Fatah and Hamas, and the political paralysis resulting from the split between these two dominant political organizations. As neither Fatah nor Hamas welcome grassroots initiatives that challenge the Palestinian political status quo, the grassroots movement of which the youth are an important part has to struggle against three oppressive entities, rather than one. This makes it hard to mobilize widely.

However, at present there is a growing youth movement that in several respects harks back to the 1980s. Young activists are part of the village committees that stage regular protests against the separation barrier in the West Bank; they have been instrumental in reintroducing the hunger strike as a forceful means of protest, bypassing completely Hamas and the PA in this initiative; and they help organize popular demonstrations against the deteriorating social and economic conditions in the West Bank.

In terms of networking, the current youth movement cuts across factional and geographical borders. It renews the focus on solidarity with Palestinians in the diaspora and inside Israel, and forges informal networks with international activists. It thus challenges the policies of both Fatah and Hamas. Even though any independent grassroots activism is suppressed in the OPT these days, the movement draws strength from its utilization of international cooperation and its popular practices.

In conclusion, despite the important obstacles to grassroots mobilization in the OPT today, the current youth movement displays a determination, clear-headedness and independence that has not been witnessed in the OPT since the 1980s, and it is therefore worth paying attention to in the future.
Introduction

The 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 that would seem the obvious one for a youthful revolt – the Occupied Palestinian Territories – there was no sustained revolt.

Granted, there were preludes to one. Two episodes in particular departed from the political routine in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and carried the promise of broader mobilization. On 15 March, inspired by their counterparts in other Arab countries, the Palestinian youth descended upon the streets of Gaza and the West Bank to protest against the political situation. Unlike previously, their main target was not the Israeli occupier, but the two political factions that rule Gaza and the West Bank, respectively: Hamas and Fatah. The protesters’ demand was simple: al-sha'b yurid inha al-inqisam (the people want the split to end), a play on the famous slogan “the people want the regime to fall.” A flurry of Facebook activism brought thousands of young people out into the streets, and one direct consequence of their activism and the Arab Spring was that Hamas and Fatah leaders sat down to negotiate a reconciliation deal in April. This was not directly related to the Israeli occupation, but reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas will have important consequences for the whole conflict, as Israel is determined to prevent the Palestinian factions from uniting.

The other episode was directly related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On 15 May, the day of the Palestinian nakba (catastrophe), thousands of Palestinians marched on the Israeli border in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Activists from Syria managed to break through the border fence and enter the village of Majdal Shams, before Israeli forces were able to push them back. Fourteen Palestinians were killed and hundreds wounded during the clashes. Even though the regional situation facilitated this mass rally (the inspiration from the Arab spring and the Syrian regime’s tacit acceptance of the march on the borders), it was nevertheless a forceful show of Palestinian solidarity and political will across borders, and a prelude to the diffusion of protest to broader layers of the Palestinian population rather than it being kept to the small core of grassroots activists.

However, the demonstrations eventually came to naught. A year after the 15 March movement erupted, the Palestinian news agency Ma’an commented that the youth have left both the streets and the Facebook pages against division, while the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah is still no more than “ink on paper.” The sudden mass mobilization against Israeli occupation on 15 May did not retain momentum after that date.

Why was this? In seeking to answer that question, one should not draw comparisons with the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, where the youth took on a major role in toppling or shaking the regimes. The Palestinian condition is different, since the people do not want the end of a regime, but the end of an occupation by a foreign state, Israel. At the same time, they have their own, less than democratic, elites to relate to, represented first and foremost by Fatah and Hamas, which govern the West Bank and Gaza respectively. In light of the unique situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it is more apt to compare the current political situation with what happened before and during the Intifadas of 1987 and 2000 in order to make sense of the youth movement’s current difficulties in mobilizing for political protest.

What were the socio-economic and political contexts that allowed the Intifadas of 1987 and 2000 to take place, and how do they compare with today’s situation? Which factors impede youth mobilization, and what strategies do youth activists utilize to bypass these hindrances? Is there a viable, independent youth movement in the OPT today? The answers to these questions are based on a synthesis of research reports about the 1987 and 2000 Intifadas; Fafo’s numerous reports and statistics on the West Bank and Gaza, particularly the results of a survey among 400 youths conducted in late 2011; my own interviews with activists and observers in the West Bank; and news and activist web sites in Arabic and English.
Background and mode of mobilization in the first intifada

A central feature 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. Beitler describes this as one of the main long-term triggers of the Intifada. As occupation became normalized, Palestinians worked in Israel and learned more and more about Israeli society as they learned Hebrew and started translating Israeli news into Arabic, and the result of this increased knowledge of their occupants was a strong sense of relative deprivation. At the same time, no improvement was on the horizon. Israel had no clear idea of what to do with the occupied territories, and resorted to day-to-day military management of them. The political process was non-existent, the Reagan plan of Palestinian autonomy in association with Jordan having been rejected first by Israel, then by the Palestinian National Council in 1982.

Crucially important to this picture was the active settlement policy by the Likud government from 1977 to 1987. Beitler notes that Palestinians had despaired of armed struggle against Israel at the same time as the land on which they planned to build a state was rapidly shrinking. According to Sayigh, by 1987, “52 per cent of the area of the West Bank and 42 per cent of Gaza had come under direct Israeli control, while the number of Jewish settlers had reached 67,000, besides an ever larger number of inhabitants in the settlements arching around east Jerusalem.”

Between 10 and 19 new settlements were established each year from 1977 to 1984, dropping to 3-4 a year during 1985-87.

The bleak situation coincided with a youth bulge, with 70 per cent of the population being below 30 years of age in 1987. Many of these worked inside Israel, and the economy of the occupied territories was dependent on these migratory workers. As Hiltermann shows, in 1986, up to 120,000 Palestinians worked inside Israel. They experienced comprehensive discrimination and acted as a buffer for the Israeli economy, as they would be the first to be fired when times were difficult. This led to economic depression and blocked industrialization in the Occupied Territories during the early 1980s. Hiltermann comments that already from the 1970s, a “human base” existed in the Occupied Territories, a population that – across the class spectrum – was economically exploited, politically disenfranchised, and culturally oppressed, and that was ready to be mobilized because of its experience of shared oppression.

At the same time, the political body that aspired to represent the Palestinians in both the territories and elsewhere, the PLO, was in disarray, and had been for a long time, as masterfully shown by Sayigh. The organization was paralyzed as a result of internal tensions and involvement in the Lebanese civil war, which raged at the time. In the institutional vacuum in the West Bank and Gaza, a diverse and decentralized grassroots network of committees, unions, health and welfare organizations developed, supported by the local chapters of various Palestinian factions, which were often strongly at odds with each other. The local institutions in the Occupied Territories eventually gained a great degree of autonomy, but remained associated with one of the four major national movements. One of these was the youth movement (Harakat al-Shabiba), which was loyal to Fatah.

Thus, a grassroots movement had emerged that mobilized widely, and in which there was communication and coordination between younger and older leaders as well as between the different political factions, not least between the students and the labor unions. As Hiltermann comments,

“The uprising produced its own new leadership group, the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), which was derived in large part from the leadership of those popular organizations and institutions that had been in gestation for over a decade and that by the late 1980s had reached maturity.”

The Intifada was, therefore, not a sudden and spontaneous outburst of anger, as many commentators at the time had it. The ground had been well prepared by a growing base of activists, and the ready-made local and horizontal organizational structures that existed in December 1987 made the transition from seeming political anomie to intense politicization of entire families and villages quick, as portrayed by researchers at the time.

The leadership was dominated by a young guard. Commenting on the First Intifada seven months
after it started, Joe Stork wrote that he witnessed a

“youth war of independence which was not directed only at the Israeli occupation: T]he youth have also thrown off the Palestinian leadership embodied in the older generation of “personalities” and notables. They have thrown off the unequal relations that had characterized the role of the outside PLO leadership. They have thrown off the condescension and complacency of King Hussein and other rulers throughout the region.13

In other words, the initiatives of local grassroots networks led by young people replaced the paralyzed Palestinian political elite. These new networks were characterized by direct democratic decision-making, absence of ideological squabbles and a high capacity for adaptation, all of which made it very difficult for the Israeli occupying power to deal with the uprising.14

2011 and 1987 compared
To a significant degree the economic and political context that facilitated the outbreak of the 1987 Intifada applied also in 2011. In terms of the Israeli state’s “stick-without-carrot” policy towards the Palestinians, activists and observers agree that the situation has never been bleaker than in this century. A nadir was reached with Israel’s invasion of Gaza in 2008-09, which cost between 1,387 and 1,417 Palestinian lives, the vast majority of them civilian.15 The settlement activity, which was a major cause of unrest in 1987 and 2000, has continued unabated in the West Bank. Excluding East Jerusalem, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank increased from 190,206 in 2000 to 350,143 in 2012.16 For several years there have been weekly, and sometimes daily, Israeli incursions into supposedly PA-administered areas of the West Bank, during which Israeli forces have patrolled, questioned and arrested Palestinians. All of these developments make life harder for ordinary Palestinians, and there have been few positive developments to balance the increased hardship. Palestinians see their land dwindle while there is no political process going on to change their rapidly deteriorating reality. In this respect, the situation is directly comparable with the situation in 1987, but even graver when seen from a Palestinian perspective.

Also in terms of socio-economic conditions, the present situation can be compared to the build-up to the First Intifada in 1987. Then, work in Israel was an important way of earning an income, because of the structural integration of Israel and the OPT after 1967. In 1986, 120,000 Palestinians, most of them young people, worked in Israel. At the same time, young university graduates experienced difficulties finding relevant jobs inside the Palestinian territories.17 The combination of occupation and the possibility of working in Israel created, in the words of Meron Benvenisti, “a curious combination of individual prosperity and communal stagnation, an auxiliary and subservient sector of the Israeli economy, a source of cheap, unskilled labor and agricultural surpluses.”18 In the Palestinian territories, the result of this situation was economic depression and blocked industrialization.19 The situation is aggravated today. Israeli closures have reduced significantly the figure of Palestinians working inside Israel: the International Labour Organization estimated in 2007 that some 63,000 Palestinians worked in Israel and Israeli settlements, compared to those 120,000 in 1986.20 At the same time, there has been a dramatic population increase in the OPT: in 1997, 1,895,683 people, and in 2007 3,761,646 people – a 30 per cent increase in ten years.21 According to the Israeli human rights organization B’tselem, the separation barrier between the West Bank and Israel and the blockade of the Gaza Strip in recent years has taken the bread off the tables of thousands of Palestinian workers.22 The World Bank recently calculated that youth unemployment (among 15-to-29-year-olds) was 43.5 percent in Gaza and 25.9 percent in the West Bank.23 During the whole of September 2012, strikes and demonstrations were organized around the West Bank to protest against high prices and the cost of living.24

In short, the political, social and economic indicators in 2011 bear comparison with those of 1987, which are said to be important factors when explaining the outbreak of the Intifada. The Palestinian youth face bleak prospects for the future and have plenty of injustices to be angry about. Yet, while mobilization is by no means insignificant among the Palestinian youth, it has proven hard to achieve massive and sustained mobilization for protest. The 15 March movement and the march on the Israeli borders in 2011 were evidence of this will to protest, and of the difficulties of mobilizing for sustained protest. The larger picture of contentious action in the OPT shows the contrast with the prelude to the Intifada more clearly. Writing about the First Intifada, Saiygh notes a strong correlation between an increase in young university graduates unable to find jobs in a faltering economy and an increase in “illegal acts” such as stone-throwing or demonstrations. According to Saiygh, there were 953 such events in 1985, 1,358 in 1986 and 2,982 in 1987.25 Examining the quarterly chronology of the Journal of Palestine Studies from 16 November 2010 to 15 November 2011, I have counted 420 contentious incidents, of which 304 were...
non-violent and 116 were violent. Of the non-violent incidents, 248 were demonstrations, rallies or marches, mostly in the West Bank, in some cases including international and Israeli activists.

The 2010-2011 figures are not insignificant, and point at an established mode of protest (the same kinds of non-violent demonstrations and marches took place regularly also in 2012). However, they are far from being on the scale of the 1980s protests.

Explaining the difficulties in mobilizing

Why do youthful protests fail to mobilize in large numbers and for an extended period of time? The favored, commonsensical explanation among many observers, Palestinian and foreign, is that the Palestinian youth are characterized by disillusionment and political apathy. According to one observer, the youth’s biggest concern is not liberation, but economy and education: they want the good life and are loath to start fighting for their freedom. Reports by research organizations concur:

[Though young Palestinians played a critical role during the first Intifada (1987 to 1991), there is little desire for political participation today. (...) While there is concern about the political conditions in which they live, Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are equally concerned with their looks, their health, and their possibility of marriage.]

Other observers claim that there is a widespread sense of fatigue among the youth, as previous struggles have caused many sacrifices but little gain. This is certainly true to some extent. The Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza point to the sufferings of their older brothers or parents, asking rhetorically what they gained from losing the best years of their life in Israeli prisons. However, on the level of mass activism it is doubtful that such explanations hold. Marwan Khawaja has shown that increased Israeli repression during the period 1976-1985 in fact intensified Palestinian resistance in the same period. The fatigue explanation also does not correspond with the perception of Palestinian youths themselves. In Fafo’s 2011 survey of 400 youths in the OPT, only 26 per cent agreed with the statement, “The Palestinian youth are not interested in politics”, while 74 per cent disagreed. Fifty-six per cent thought that the youth are able to greatly or moderately influence Palestinian political leaders.

Furthermore, psychological explanations remain unsatisfactory because they do not really describe the concrete mechanisms by which demobilization occurs, and consequently, they cannot account for possible re-mobilization in the future, either. Which factors change people’s attitudes and feelings? It is pertinent to recall here that the First Intifada erupted suddenly and unexpectedly for most, in an atmosphere of utter disillusionment and alienation. Lastly, in a somewhat self-contradictory manner, current analyses that aim at explaining the lack or failure of youth activism tend to conclude on an upbeat note. In an article that focuses on the reasons for the failure of the 15 March movement, for example, one observer ends by noting that the ground might once again become ripe for collective action in the near future. This suggests that we have to move beyond psychological explanations and consider the political dynamics on the Palestinian scene that facilitate or impede youth mobilization. An analysis of the Second Intifada in 2000 is useful in this regard.

The second intifada as a symptom of a changed political context

At the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, several of the structural features that led to the 1987 Intifada were in place. First, the “stick-without-carrot” situation remained. Despite great expectations, ordinary Palestinians did not reap many dividends from the peace process that had been set in motion with the 1993 Declaration of Principles, signed by Arafat and Rabin. Occupation continued and the political, social and economic conditions remained difficult for large numbers of Palestinians because of rapid population growth combined with Israeli closures like checkpoints and roadblocks. Second, the peace process faltered and had lost momentum and direction as the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships proved unable to agree on major issues like borders, the status of Jerusalem and the refugee question. Third, settlement activity increased dramatically during the 1990s: both the Labor and Likud governments built new settlements, expanded existing ones and created a network of bypass roads in the 1990s.

However, the political situation both internally in the OPT and between the Palestinians and the Israelis had changed dramatically compared to that of 1987. The Oslo Accords had been signed in 1993 and a Palestinian quasi-state was in place in the West Bank and Gaza, run mainly
by Fatah, the dominant faction in the PLO. The majority of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories were now in many respects governed by their own authorities.

Given its identification with the Oslo peace process, the dire situation put the PA under severe pressure, facing dwindling legitimacy among Palestinians as a result of its inability to deliver liberation from occupation, and yet bound to the parameters of the Oslo Accords. Consequently, tensions increased sharply between the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships.

Both Israel and the Palestinian political leadership prepared militarily in the 1990s, creating an escalation in an already fragile situation. This preparation was premised on the logic of deterring the other side, but both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership miscalculated. On the Palestinian side, several factors caused military preparation: internal struggle among the factions (old versus young, local versus recently arrived leadership, Fatah versus Hamas) and the belief that building up military force might improve the bargaining situation.35

Unlike the First Intifada, then, the Second was a confrontation between elites; the grassroots organization that defined the First Intifada was largely absent in the second. Corresponding to this difference, the Second Intifada was violent and militarized from the very beginning. Fatah’s armed wing, the Tanzim, was of central importance, and other Palestinian organizations also armed and prepared for military action.36 As for Hamas, the most prominent challenger to Fatah’s hegemony in the OPT, it had already engaged in violent struggle, introducing suicide attacks as a tactic in 1994.

This political structure and mode of mobilization precluded non-violent mobilization on the grassroots level, which had been the hallmark of the 1987 Intifada. Norman notes the existence of numerous non-violent resistance activities during the Second Intifada, such as the replanting of uprooted olive trees, hunger strikes by political prisoners and demonstrations against the occupation. However, these failed to coalesce into a movement, not because of lack of support or engagement, but because of constraining factors at the local, national and international levels.37 On the Palestinian level, these constraining factors included lack of local unified leadership; internal conflict between the Palestinian factions, notably Fatah and Hamas, which limited participation in collective action; the professionalization of NGOs, which failed to address the pressing issues in their hunt for Western donor money; and not least the authoritarian nature of the Palestinian Authority led by Yasir Arafat (and Mahmoud Abbas after him). In fact, the PA repressed popular resistance, both because civil society leaders were seen as threats to the leadership and because the PA was tasked with keeping calm in the OPT by Israel as part of the Oslo agreement. On the international level, donor countries remained loyal to the peace process long after it was dead, and kept supporting dialogue and normalization programs. According to Norman this led to a shift in the framing of nonviolence that was detrimental to mobilization. In order to please donors, non-violence was framed not in terms of creative resistance, but rather in terms of dialogue and normalization with the occupier (through people-to-people programs and the like). Such initiatives became steadily more unpopular among Palestinians as it became clear that their situation worsened after 1993. Consequently, nonviolence became ineffective as a frame for the mode of resistance and failed to engage the youth, especially since they had no experience with the First Intifada and its successful and creative mode of nonviolence.

These developments curtailed the possibilities for peaceful mass mobilization. Specifically, they left the youth rather marginal in the Second Intifada. A study of youth attitudes during the Second Intifada by Norman shows that there was no lack of will to participate in non-violent activism, but the youth felt their activism was used for political gains rather than the common national good.38 As Sayre and al-Botmeh write,

[b]y the time of the second Intifada (2000-2004), the role of young people had been reduced significantly. While youth often continued to be the visible face of the conflict, the role of established political structures was much greater than in the first uprising.39

The established political structures – notably Fatah and Hamas – continue to play the decisive role today, and their influence on youth activism and grassroots activism in general has been devastating. Today, these two organizations now control quasi states, and struggle to fill the role of resistance movements and governments at the same time. As Bröning notes about Fatah post-1993, it became a de facto “state party” when it returned to the OPT in the 1990s, with obvious tension between this role and its role as a liberation movement. One immediate consequence was the damage done to internal and national democracy.40 The same can be said of Hamas after 2007. Civil liberties have been steadily more curtailed under the current Hamas regime in Gaza.
Furthermore, in contrast to 1987, when Fatah and the leftist radical forces managed to unite under the PLO umbrella, the so-called reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah that started in April 2011 – as a result of the 15 March protests – has faltered, as neither party seems willing to enter into earnest dialogue.

The political alienation among the youth noted by observers is in the last instance due not to the split between Fatah and Hamas, but to the existence of the two authoritarian regimes created by these two movements. In contrast to 1987, when there was only the external Israeli oppressor, today activists face repression also from their own authorities, who do not accept internal challenges or other ways of dealing with Israel than their own. This is felt acutely by the Palestinian youth, who complain about favoritism in the public sector and the lack of political freedom – more so in Gaza than in the West Bank.41 Despite claims by PA and Hamas officials that they work towards improving the situation, recent developments have suggested that it is in fact deteriorating both places. In Gaza, Hamas cracked down resolutely and violently on the 15 March movement and it monitors peaceful NGO activity closely. In the West Bank, the PA has instituted a security policy that resembles the classic authoritarianism of Middle Eastern states. During a demonstration against Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in July 2012, for example, PA repression "took the form of mukhabarat [secret police] and police beating people with batons and metal chains, sexually assaulting and spitting in the face of female protestors, kidnapping and beating several people, including journalists, in police stations."42

The result of Fatah’s and Hamas’s policies is a politically fragmented and paralyzed society. Writing about the 1987 Intifada, Khawaja suggests that

repression can strengthen collective identity, the sense of belonging to a group, by operating as a symbolic reminder of a group’s shared circumstance vis-a-vis authorities and their agents of control. And salient identity implies increased within-group solidarity.43

The contrast to 2011 is striking. The emergence of the PA and the Hamas government has confused and broken down the “collective identity” and “belonging” that Khawaja identified as a major force in the 1987 Intifada. The “within-group solidarity” has been weakened as a consequence of the liberation movement turning into a predatory state with vested interests in the status quo. Activists thus have to contend with two oppressive regimes, Hamas and the PA, in addition to the occupier, a fact that creates at least two important hurdles for a massive youth mobilization. First, in 1987 the youth successfully rebelled against the Palestinian elites in part because they were not present on the ground and had only limited possibilities of controlling the Palestinian grassroots in the OPT. With the Oslo Accords that changed, and both the PA and Hamas now have the means to actively suppress activism that is not controlled and condoned by them. Second, the paralyzing effects of factionalism are exacerbated as a result of the two major factions controlling separate enclaves. As a USAID representative succinctly expressed it in 2003, the current Palestinian context is one where “everyone is either affiliated with a political movement to some degree or labelled as such.”44 Therefore, criticizing one faction will easily be construed as supporting another. Consequently, despite widespread dissatisfaction with Fatah and Hamas, there is little room left for independent activism that challenges their policies. Thus, according to Mazen al-Jaabari at the Orient House’s Youth Development Department, the 2007 war between the two groups led to a “complete split (infiṣāl) on all levels: at university, at work, in the street. As a consequence, many youths became alienated.”45 In short, the Oslo process exacerbated the detrimental effects on popular mobilization of a national liberation movement at war with itself.

**Back to the future? Current Youth activism**

The Palestinian national movement experienced fragmentation also in the 1980s. Then, popular activism and anger ultimately bypassed the paralysis on elite level within the PLO and produced the First Intifada. The remainder of this report will deal with three questions. What kind of popular activism do we see today? What is the role of the youth in it? And what is its political potential, given the current Palestinian context?

Let us start by describing the 304 non-violent incidents counted in 2010-2011 in more detail. These incidents are particularly interesting, since they represent a sustained and renewed focus on non-violent resistance at the grassroots level. They comprise demonstrations and marches against the separation barrier, settlement expansion and the expropriation of Palestinian land in
the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Several of the marches are organized by village committees in affected areas, such as the well-known cases of Bil'in, Ni'lin and al-Nabi Salih, and these committees coordinate through the grassroots initiative “Stop the Wall” campaign.\(^6\) The demonstrations and marches gather crowds ranging from the tens to the hundreds, who engage in shouting slogans, carrying placards and non-violently confronting Israeli troops and settlers. With irregular intervals there tend to be initiatives in which international activists figure prominently, as was the case several times in 2010-11, for example with the so-called Freedom Flotilla, where a group of ships tried to sail to Gaza with aid and construction materials.

The 15 March movement and the plethora of independent Palestinian youth initiatives in the OPT and elsewhere are closely associated with this kind of activism, which is commonly termed “the popular resistance.” In its current form, it emerged during the last decade, and displays four characteristics that put it in opposition to the two dominant elites in the OPT, Fatah/PA and Hamas, alike: it refuses to utilize violence; it opposes normalization with Israel as an occupier; it emphasizes international cooperation and the inclusion of the Palestinian refugees and the so-called 1948 Palestinians (Palestinian citizens of Israel) in the struggle for independence; and it calls for political reforms that will allow Palestinians all over the world to be represented by a new, unified leadership.

What is the role of the youth in this activism? There are no statistics on youth participation in activism of this kind, but it is possible to assess their role through a combination of field work and news reporting. In the regular demonstrations against the separation barrier in the West Bank, of which there were two to four every week during the period surveyed, youths certainly participate actively, but these events are characterized by bringing middle-aged, old people and youths together. However, they are not necessarily the driving force in the village committees organizing the protests. Experienced activists claim that the youth remain an under-utilized force, but that they are increasingly becoming an important part of the popular resistance movement. Jamal Jum’aa, coordinator of the “Stop the Wall” campaign, states that his organization has had a focus on engaging the youth from 2006.\(^7\) Through exhibitions, lectures, and local boycott teams they successfully made the big universities in the West Bank (al-Najah, Bir Zeit, al-Quds) stop selling Israeli products, and they cooperate with youth centers in the villages to empower them and increase their political awareness.

There seems to be an increasing amount of activism in which the youth are a main driving force. One is the Sharek Youth forum, which publishes reports on the condition of the youth and organizes activities to empower young people. Significantly, its Gaza office was closed by the Hamas authorities in 2010, apparently because its activities were seen as disruptive. Others include the Palestinian Youth Parliament, Juzoor and the Jerusalem Youth Parliament. These organizations participated in a youth conference in Jerusalem in November 2011, at which the mood was “crystal clear”, according to one of the facilitators: the participants wanted no more negotiations, but struggle against occupation. They were all for a boycott of Israel, and there was new awareness about the importance of refugees and 1948 Palestinians as partners in the liberation struggle.\(^8\) Then there is of course the 15 March movement, in which young people in the West Bank and Gaza coordinated with one another to organize the big rallies that criticized both Hamas and Fatah for not being able to reconcile and lead a united resistance struggle against Israeli occupation.

The 15 March movement is an instance of a greater process of youth empowerment the future of which is hard to predict, but it is already making itself felt, judging from evidence from the West Bank. One principal actor is the Independent Youth Movement (al-Hirak al-Shababi, IYM), whose members played a major role in the 15 March movement and also in the weekly demonstrations in the West Bank. The IYM makes a point of not being affiliated with a political party or organization, breaking with the traditional factionalism of Palestinian politics. This is in itself a significant stance and an expression of protest in a society where nearly everyone is or is regarded to be affiliated with one political faction or other.

A central feature of the emerging independent youth movement is its uncompromising approach to the occupation and the international diplomacy surrounding it. It opposes formal Palestinian-Israeli ties, which is the de facto policy of the PA (by virtue of its cooperation with Israel on security issues). It is also critical of foreign donors and does not accept support from what it regards as dishonest brokers. During a youth summit in Ramallah in 2011 which was financed by USAID, IYM activists demonstrated, carrying placards with frank slogans such as “USAID, go to hell.”\(^9\) In their view, US money comes with strings attached and should be turned down. The notions of negotiations and confidence-building, which were central to the peace process, are
scrapped by these youths, who have a no-nonsense approach to the Israeli occupation and the international community’s role, yet without endorsing the violent activism that is the hallmark of Islamist and secular militant groups in Gaza.50

The clear message and demands of the independent youth movement may be a factor of strength when compared to the lethargy and lack of direction which characterizes the established political authorities. They demand an end to the current split in Palestinian politics and elections for the Palestinian National Council, the highest body of the PLO, which will then serve as the unifying and legitimate representative of all the Palestinian people, including refugees in the diaspora and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Second, they are against normalization with Israel as long as the occupation goes on. These clear demands are equally challenging to Fatah and Hamas. However, the triple edge of their demands, so to speak (against Israel, Fatah and Hamas), may also be too complex for success in mobilization on a large scale. It is easier to unite behind the “no to the occupation” slogan than under several slogans that kick in three directions at once.

Recent developments in the West Bank nevertheless suggest that the independent-minded youth activists have hit a nerve among the Palestinian population in the OPT. Young people took the lead in two new waves of contentious action that directly challenged the PA/Fatah leadership. First, during 2012 there was a wave of hunger strikes among Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention, protesting against the practice of administrative detention, whereby Israeli authorities may imprison Palestinians indefinitely without charging them with any crime. The hunger strike wave was started by Khadir Adnan (34), a member of the militant group Islamic Jihad, who refused to eat for 66 days until Israeli authorities agreed to release him. He was followed by the 30-year old Hana al-Shalabi, who refused to eat for 43 days. By the time of their release, their initiatives had been taken up by others through informal networks: prisoners meeting at transfers and in courtrooms, and via family members who visited and spread the word through mass media. In May, up to 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails were on hunger strike, and eventually forced Israeli authorities to reduce the use of solitary confinement and administrative detention.51

Hunger strikes are nothing new among Palestinian prisoners, and this particular wave was only partly successful in achieving its aims. However, its importance lies not in the act itself, but in its meaning. As a spokesman for al-Dameer, the organization which campaigned on behalf of the prisoners, said of Khadir Adnan:

So Khader Adnan, I think he’s very clever. Because everyone, even inside Fatah, they are talking about the peaceful, popular resistance. What do you need more than a hunger strike to support, if you are really interested in popular resistance? Why did the Palestinian media and the Palestinian Authority ignore Khader Adnan and his hunger strike? Because he’s [affiliated with] Islamic Jihad? Or because he’s taking the memory back to the days when the prisoners were leading the national resistance?

He’s a young man — he’s 34 — and he proved that he’s a leader. All the people in the street called him The Leader Khader Adnan. So you have a youth movement in the street, and finally they get a leader. So during the protests and demonstrations to support Khader Adnan, all the youth from all political parties, they were in front of Ofer to support him, because they saw they have identification with this leader, they said: here’s a leader. [PA negotiator] Saeb Erekat is not a leader for the Palestinians.52

The quote overstates the importance of Adnan’s hunger strike, as there were no signs of a new or unified youth movement under his leadership. However, the point remains that his hunger strike and will to make a personal sacrifice galvanized other prisoners and ordinary Palestinians into solidarity action, and that it also showed the impotence of the PA and Fatah.

The second wave of protests is explicit in its criticism of the Palestinian leadership, and potentially more destabilizing to the West Bank. In September 2012, a series of demonstrations and strikes protesting against high prices and deteriorating living conditions hit the West Bank. Although PA president Mahmoud Abbas tried to align with the protestors by hailing the events as a Palestinian Spring, it was clear to everyone that both he and his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad were the targets of criticism.

The protests are particularly significant because the West Bank youth have previously expressed optimism about the socio-economic outlook, as a result of the international community’s aid to the PA since 2007. Anger at harsh living conditions thus signals that an important pillar of stability is crumbling in the West Bank – and there is no easy remedy, as the West Bank economy
is kept alive by international and Israeli goodwill.

The role of the youth has increasingly been to challenge not only Israeli occupation, but the Palestinian leadership. This makes for instability and erosion of legitimacy for the PA and Hamas in the short term. That the PA and Hamas share this interpretation is clear from their violent clampdown on the activities of the youth movement. Both Fatah and Hamas infiltrated the 15 March campaign, and in Gaza, Hamas security forces violently attacked peaceful demonstrators. Recently the PA in the West Bank followed suit, when its security forces attacked and beat young demonstrators who had gathered to protest a planned visit by Israeli vice premier Shaul Mofaz to the West Bank.53

While violent crackdowns are effective short-term measures, the demonstrations and the authorities’ fear of them, especially in the West Bank, signal the potential in the long run for another wave of non-violent mass popular protest.

New networks
The protest movement is not confined to the West Bank and Gaza. A major asset for independent youth activists is their cooperation across borders, both with other Palestinians and with the international solidarity movement. Israeli and international activists regularly take part in demonstrations against the separation barrier. In some highly mediatized events, international participation is the cornerstone of the activism. The most prominent examples are the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza in 2010, and the Welcome to Palestine initiative in 2011, in which hundreds of international activists tried to go to Israel simultaneously with the explicit aim of visiting the OPT, in protest against the common Israeli practice of denying both Palestinians and foreigners access to the OPT. The latter initiative was organized by 30 Palestinian civil society organizations.54

Of greater importance than such media stunts is the international campaign to apply pressure on Israel to end the occupation through legal and economic means, represented first and foremost by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. A boycott long having been part of Palestinian non-violent strategies, not least during the First Intifada,55 it has now come to constitute the core of a Palestinian-initiated international movement against Israeli occupation. It provides a focal point for international activism, which attempts to pressure businesses and governments around the world to withdraw from investment in and cooperation with companies or organizations that support Israeli settlements.

In line with its emphasis on cooperation with actors outside the OPT, the popular resistance movement embraces and coordinates with the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere, and the Palestinian citizens of Israel. This recognition of Palestinians outside the OPT is significant because it represents a break with the national movement’s focus on Gaza and the West Bank after the First Intifada. The effect of the renewed contact and cooperation is to foster a shared agenda of creating a representative Palestinian leadership and ending the parochial factionalism that haunts Palestinian politics.56 As the IYM writes on its Facebook page:

We call for ending the division through direct elections to the Palestinian National Council (PNC) of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). New PNC elections guarantee representation of all Palestinians wherever they live including those living in the territory occupied in 1948, 1967 and the diaspora.57

The political realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem to facilitate this diffusion of Palestinian youth activism across borders. Israeli analysts note the dangers of the widening gulf between Palestinian citizens of Israel and other Israelis, arguing that the internal and external Palestinian struggles may be fused as the situation of the internals (Palestinian citizens of Israel) comes to resemble that of the externals (Palestinians in the OPT) at the same time as a one-state solution is becoming the only viable option for Palestinians.58 Young Palestinian activists in the West Bank, frustrated by the lack of dialogue at the leadership level, nurture close ties with their counterparts in Gaza in virtual networks, creating bonds of solidarity and sharing information.

While conditions are more difficult in Gaza than in the West Bank, signs of new practices are apparent there too. One clear sign is the massive turnout for the 15 March demonstration for Palestinian unity in 2011. More people attended in Gaza than in the West Bank, and the movement is also relatively more well-known there, in spite of Hamas’s harsh clampdown on the demonstrators. Smaller, independent groups have also emerged, though their impact is still limited.
A prominent example is the Gaza Youth Break Out (GYBO) blogger collective. Its Manifesto was published online in December 2010. A desperate cry of desperation and anger, it quickly received considerable media coverage. Although the manifesto kicked out in all directions, Hamas came in for sharp criticism of its governance of the Gaza strip:

During the last years, Hamas has been doing all they can to control our thoughts, behaviour and aspirations. Here in Gaza we are scared of being incarcerated, interrogated, hit, tortured, bombed, killed. We cannot move as we want, say what we want, do what we want.59

Writing about the manifesto in December 2010, The Observer described it as having “travelled around the world at an unexpected speed and has harvested thousands of supporters, many of them human rights activists, who say they are ready to help.” 60 In the event, it failed to mobilize sustained support, and our research suggests that only about 20 % of Palestinian youths aged 15-25 are aware of the initiative. But the mere existence of such groups, especially in the stifling atmosphere of Gaza, is significant in itself, not least because it explicitly addressed an international audience, having been written in eloquent English.61

In sum, we can state that there is a vibrant, although small, youth movement that resembles the 1980s activism in important ways (being non-violent and grassroots-based), and at the same time it is part of a new mode of activism (coordinating with Palestinians elsewhere and working through international political and legal channels). According to the youth themselves, the current political elites do not take the youth seriously. As the Sharek youth forum argues, the

youth in the second intifada were either predominantly excluded or used by the political factions as tools in an armed struggle within which they lacked an authoritative voice.62

The new, independent youth movement does not accept this role. Just as the 1987 Intifada represented an uprising against the paralyzed older generation, there is a visible youth movement today that challenges the existing elites.
Conclusion

The political role of the youth in the OPT is constrained by three factors: Israeli occupation, oppression by Fatah and Hamas, and the political paralysis resulting from the split between these two dominant political organizations. As neither Fatah nor Hamas welcome grassroots initiatives that challenge the Palestinian political status quo, the grassroots movement of which the youth are an important part has to struggle against three oppressive entities, rather than one. This makes it difficult for them to muster the resources that are necessary for mass mobilization, as shown by the short-lived attempts at such mobilization in 2011. The top-down mode of Palestinian politics, which was strengthened with the advent of the PA in 1994 and reaffirmed during and after the Second Intifada, is a major impediment for those activists who would like the youth to regain the important role they once played in the OPT.

However, on closer inspection, youth activism today bears important resemblances to that of the 1980s, which eventually led to the First Intifada. At the same time, new and expansive ways of networking may partly offset the financial and organizational difficulties faced by the new youth movement.

Having sprung from the popular, non-violent grassroots-based resistance that is especially strong in the West Bank, current youth activism resembles that of the 1980s in several respects, as does the environment in which it takes place. Now as then, the youth partake in and sometimes take the lead in village committees and networks of demonstrators who energetically organize marches and demonstrations to protest the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land – even though the scale of the demonstrations is currently smaller than in the mid-1980s. Now as then, the youth face difficult socio-economic conditions, an occupation that encroaches more and more on their lives, and a divided leadership that is unable to take a constructive political initiative to fight against this development. And lastly, the youth have been instrumental in recent protests against harsh living conditions in the West Bank, bringing to mind the important role of the students and labor movements in laying the groundwork for popular mobilization in the 1980s.

In terms of networking, the current youth movement cuts across factional and geographic borders. The 15 March movement brought to light a youth current that is equally critical of Fatah and Hamas and seeks to cooperate with independent forces across the West Bank-Gaza divide. This clearly represents a break with the current mode of Palestinian politics, which is organized along factional lines. The youth movement also transcends the post-1987 focus on the West Bank and Gaza, which disregarded Palestinian refugees in the diaspora and Palestinian citizens of Israel. The new non-violent activism places much emphasis on cooperation with international activists, who are able to use legal and economic channels in the struggle against occupation and colonization of Palestinian land. The clearest sign of this is the BDS campaign, which has gathered a head of steam over the last years.

The networks that the Palestinian youth forge and the practices they engage in and have the potential of making up for the constraints they face to some degree. Young activists are part of the village committees that stage regular protests against the separation barrier in the West Bank; they have been instrumental in reintroducing the hunger strike as a means of protest, bypassing completely Hamas and the PA in this initiative; and they help organize popular demonstrations against the deteriorating social and economic conditions in the West Bank. These are all initiatives that highlight the impotency of the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and Gaza; they are hugely popular forms of contention among ordinary Palestinians; and they draw a significant amount of media coverage.

2012 is not 1987. The Israeli occupation is leading towards a de facto one-state solution without citizenship rights for Palestinians, and the Gaza and West Bank leaderships are coming to resemble more and more the authoritarian regimes against which the Arab youth have recently revolted. 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. However, the current youth movement displays a determination, clear-headedness and independence that has not been witnessed in the OPT since the 1980s, and it is therefore worth paying attention to in the future.
Endnotes


3. I have used the unpublished tabulation reports made by Åge A. Tiltnes at Fafo. Some results of the survey are available in Mona Christophersen, Jacob Hoigilt, and Åge A. Tiltnes, Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring (Oslo: Fafo/NOREF, 2012), http://www.peacebuilding.no/eng/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Israel-Palestine/Publications/Palestinian-youth-and-the-Arab-Spring.


8. Hiltermann, Behind the Intifada, 37.

9. Ibid., 51.


11. Hiltermann, Behind the Intifada, 52–53.


19. Ibid., 30.


26. Non-violent incidents include stone-throwing by civilian youths against Israeli soldiers raiding West Bank towns and against armed Israeli settlers. Violent attacks were almost exclusively in the form of rocket or mortar attacks on Israel from the Gaza strip, carried out in most cases by unidentified Palestinians who in most cases belonged to one or other of the numerous militant resistance groups, including Hamas’s ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades.

27. Interview with Jamil Rabbah, Near East Consulting, Ramallah, 27 November 2010.

28. Sayre and al-Botmeh, Youth Exclusion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: The Impact of Social, Economic and Political Forces, 8.

29. Christophersen, Hoigilt, and Tiltnes, Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring, 11.


31. There were significant differences between the West Bank and Gaza on the last question. In the West Bank, 24 per cent thought that youth had a lot of influence on political leaders, while 42 per cent thought that their influence was moderate. The corresponding figures from Gaza were eight per cent and 38 per cent. This perhaps indicates the greater degree of authoritarianism currently experienced by Gaza youth.

32. e.g. Doumani, “Family and Politics in Salafit.”


36. Ibid.


38. Ibid., 73.

39. Sayre and al-Botmeh, Youth Exclusion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: The Impact of Social, Economic and Political Forces, 44.


41. Christophersen, Hoigilt, and Tiltnes, Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring, 10–11. 422 youth aged 15-25 were interviewed. 54 percent thought the degree of democracy in the West Bank “satisfactory”, while the corresponding figure for Gaza was 26 percent.


44. ICG, Islamic Social Welfare Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: A Legitimate Target? (Amman/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2003), 11.

45. Interview with Mazen al-Jaabari, Bayt Hanina, 12 December 2011.


47. Interview with the author in Jerusalem, 12 December 2011.

48. Interview with Mazin al-Ja’bari, director of Youth Development Department, Bayt Hanina, 12 December 2011.

50. The front page of the organization’s Facebook page features a picture of youths burning a piece of paper on which is written “The Oslo I Accords”.
60. Ibid.
61. The still active blog (as of October 2012) can be found at http://gazaybo.wordpress.com/.