Despite facing double repression – from the occupying Israeli state and the Palestinian National Authority – the non-violent Palestinian grassroots resistance movement is seemingly gaining traction. How has it managed to overcome repression and demobilization, and what are its limits?

**The context of demobilization**

There have been ebbs and flows in the fortunes of the Palestinian national movement, but observers and activists alike agree that never have prospects been bleaker than at present. Shortly stated, Palestinians in the OPT experience a situation of double repression: by the occupying Israeli state and by their own, quasi-sovereign authorities in the form of the PA in the West Bank and the Hamas government in the Gaza strip.

The nature of the Israeli occupation has reduced the West Bank into disjointed Palestinian-controlled enclaves, outside of which the movement of any Palestinian is subjected to severe restrictions and hindrances. The large and small Jewish settlements with their bypass roads, the winding route of the separation barrier, and the existence of numerous military “security zones” closed to Palestinians all carve up the geography of the West Bank. They are accompanied by a host of closures and checkpoints that make travel between villages and cities cumbersome and at times impossible.

This has led to political fragmentation. Today activists face repression also from their own authorities. Since the Palestinian state-building project started after the second intifada, and even more so after the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, any Palestinian political actor that wants to challenge the status quo has to contend with not one repressive regime, but two – the Israeli and the Palestinian. The result is that the role of civil society and the culture of popular, cross-factional grassroots activism of the 1980s have been weakened at the same pace as the Fatah and Hamas elites have asserted their control. A culture of fear has come to dominate the political climate in the West Bank. PA security forces cooperate with the Israeli military in identifying and detaining militant activists; Palestinian dissidents of all political colours are persecuted; and the media is closely monitored. The PA has, in short, begun to resemble the other Arab police states. The result of the Palestinian elite’s policies is a politically fragmented and paralyzed society, characterized by political inertia, not least among young people.

**Creative practices**

Against this bleak background the sustained effort of grassroots activism in the West Bank is a remarkable phenomenon. Inspired in part by the village protests in the West Bank that have taken place since 2003 to protest against the separation barrier, young Palestinian activists have made a clean break with the PA’s policy of
pursuing national liberation through bilateral negotiations in the Oslo peace process. Without bothering to wait for cues from their elderly leadership, they have engaged in unarmed but confrontational resistance against the ongoing Israeli occupation and confiscation of West Bank land. They have marched on checkpoints; agitated repeatedly for Palestinian unity across factional borders; demonstrated inside Jewish settlements; and organized big annual demonstrations in Hebron against the settler presence in the middle of that city.

A particularly successful strategy has been to establish ‘settlements’ on Palestinian land occupied by Israel. The first of these was Bab al-Shams. On January 11, 2013, a group of about 200 Palestinian activists, most of them youths in their 20s and 30s, erected tents on a piece of land between Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement of Maale Adummim. Dubbed E 1 by Israeli authorities, the area is occupied by Israel, and plans for major settlement construction there had recently been approved by the government. As soon as the first tent had been erected, Palestinian and international media reported that the activists had announced the establishment of a Palestinian village called Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun) in the area, and that the Palestinian owners of the land had agreed to this move. In effect, the Palestinians had established a settlement on Israeli-occupied land. It took the Israeli authorities more than two days to get the necessary court rulings to dismantle the tents and arrest the activists, and by that time, around 2,000 Palestinians had visited or tried to visit the site, and it had got the attention of major international news outlets, like BBC, the Guardian and the New York Times. Since then, four more villages have been established, the last one near Jericho in February 2014.

These are actions that directly challenge the occupation (which is often otherwise hidden behind the “screen” of the Palestinian Authority) and galvanize bystanders. At the same time, unlike violent activism they do not cause difficulties to the PA, which has committed itself to provide security for Israel in the West Bank as part of the 2003 so-called Road Map to Peace supported by the Quartet (the US, Russia, UN and EU). In addition, they focus on the occupation and do not criticize the PA or the factional elites explicitly. Consequently, the authorities feel no need to crack down on this kind of activism, as they have on other kinds of grassroots activism recently.

**The challenge of networks**

In order for the grassroots activists to mobilize widely, they need to build strong networks. There are two hindrances to this. First, the Israeli ‘matrix of control’ in the West Bank – the system of checkpoints, settlements and closures – makes movement between cities and villages cumbersome. Second, the Palestinian political culture of factionalism makes it nearly impossible to assume an independent position from which to voice criticism in Palestinian society. Factionalism impedes any new political initiative because it is likely to be framed as one faction’s attempt at discrediting or sabotaging another, and so the young activists are caught in a web of factions and allegiances.

Between them, factionalism and the matrix of control have made integration across political and geographical divides difficult for young grassroots activists, despite their shared disillusion with the political elite and their common grievances. The result is that although independent networks of youth activists exist in cities across the West Bank (with Ramallah as a main node), they constitute at present less a movement than a kind of marketplace of ideas and protest events to which youth from various parts of the West Bank contribute from time to time. They are at odds over important issues like the desirability to engage in armed resistance, whether to agitate for the dismantling of the PNA or not, and if the UN track is the right strategy for liberating Palestine. They have yet to gather under a common ideological and programmatic umbrella.

A consensus has been evolving over the last years, though. Activists I interviewed from all over the West Bank agree that the very structure of Palestinian politics impedes the resistance struggle. They hold that for the national movement to be effective, the Palestinian Liberation Organization needs to be revitalized. In addition, the focus since the Oslo agreements only on the West Bank and Gaza has fragmented the Palestinian nation, and the refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and elsewhere need to be represented in a better way. Consequently independent youth groups in Ramallah have decided to agitate for new elections for the long-defunct Palestinian National Council, the supreme body of the PLO, as a prelude to a full overhaul of the national movement based on real representation of all Palestinians, whether in the occupied territories or outside.
Also, a process of integration is taking place, because of happenings like Bab al-Shams, where activists meet, socialize and discuss, and because of the networks built up around the village protests that have established a joint committee: The Popular Struggle Coordination Committee. Of particular interest in this regard is the fact that several of the youths who engage in these networks are active members of Fatah youth. This point is important because factionalism is an obstacle to the independent youth’s attempt at mobilizing, as argued above. Considering the fact that Fatah is the dominant player in the West Bank and a crucial part of any attempt to reform Palestinian politics, its younger generation’s willingness to join their independent peers in activism and criticism of the older generation is potentially important.

Conclusion

In the current situation, the youthful grassroots activism I have been reviewing here cannot grow into a mass movement, as the structural and political impediments it faces are too great. Indeed, in light of the double repression it is subject to it is remarkable that there are still so many activist environments and so much sustained activism. The explanation is that a combination of creative contentious practices and strategies to pacify or bypass the Palestinian elite have made activists able to confront the Israeli occupation in spite of the impediments to mobilization. However, to be able to mobilize massively, these grassroots activists are dependent on support from above, and that support is not forthcoming. The grassroots, non-violent activism in the West Bank is therefore not a mass movement by any standards. Still, despite double repression it has been able not only to sustain its activism, but to bring more and more pressure to bear on the Palestinian elite which it challenges. Were it to gain more support from within Palestinian society and from without, it could constitute an alternative strategy for ending the occupation in a situation where bilateral negotiations have failed for the last twenty years.