

Why is there no third intifada? An analysis of youth activism in the West Bank

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Executive summary

Recently many analysts have warned that a third intifada is imminent in the West Bank because of the difficult socio-economic conditions there and the lack of any progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Such an intifada would be directed both at the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian National Authority (PA), which has failed to provide either peace or stability. Young people were central to the first and second intifadas, and we would therefore expect them to play an important role currently. However, this report shows that despite some notable resistance efforts, in recent years Palestinian youth activists have failed to mobilize widely. This report explains the underlying reasons for that failure by pointing to three prominent factors.

First, the political environment is not conducive to the emergence of critical political actors. The relatively few youth activist groups that exist have to navigate a complex political landscape, involving two mutually hostile liberation movements, an occupying state, and a political culture of vertical trust networks. Palestinian youth activists are left out in the cold by the established elites. Even grassroots Fatah activists express this feeling. Even more seriously, critical activists are repressed not only by Israel, but also by the PA.

Second, the youth activists environments that are scattered across the West Bank have not become integrated enough to form a coherent movement. Lack of effective coordination makes it difficult to create networks that can overcome internal Palestinian divisions. The result of this is that separate youth networks evolve within municipal borders and constitute islands of activism that have mostly local impact.

Finally, the unusual and complex Palestinian predicament complicates the formulation of a simple, forceful frame to mobilize bystanders. The youth activists interviewed for this report do not agree on one common aim and strategy for their activism, but remain divided on questions such as the UN track and a one-state or two-state solution, to mention to central issues. To the extent that they agree on anything, it is a total overhaul of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), but this is a long-term aim that is not suitable for galvanizing ordinary youth into protest action. Overall, these energetic youth have not yet managed to overcome the atmosphere of frustration that pervades the Palestinian youth segment.

These conclusions have important implications for the prospects of any new popular uprising in the West Bank. *If* a third intifada should occur these findings suggest one important way it would differ from the first, successful one in 1987. In the 1980s, young workers and students were crucial in establishing strong grassroots networks that organized society effectively when the strikes and confrontations with the Israeli military began. Today there are no such networks of young people because the dedicated grassroots activists are being oppressed by their older leaders. In the absence of strong grassroots networks of young people, any new uprising is likely to be more chaotic and less effective than the first intifada.



Introduction

As the social, economic and political situation in the West Bank has deteriorated recently, warnings that a third intifada is imminent have been rife. Analysts as well as Palestinian and Israeli observers have all agreed that a third intifada might soon erupt, not least after the unrest in the Arab world that started in 2011 and is still ongoing. In the spring of 2011, demonstrations by youth against the internal Palestinian political situation spawned a Facebook site named “The third intifada”. In February 2012, The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Planning published a study that asked if a third intifada was forthcoming, and answered that 2012 would be a crucial year.¹ Israeli and foreign analysts concur. In June 2012, an analyst with the International Crisis Group stated that a third intifada was inevitable, citing Israeli intransigence and Mahmoud Abbas’s failure to make diplomatic headway as the main reasons.² And recently, a top Israeli military commander in the West Bank asserted that the third intifada has already begun.³

There are certainly signs that something is stirring. Let us look at a particularly interesting example. 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.⁴

Bab al-Shams was hailed as a qualitative change in Palestinian resistance by activists themselves and by the local media, since the “villagers” took the initiative from the occupying power by establishing their own “fact on the ground” rather than responding to an action taken by Israeli soldiers or settlers. Having prepared the event in secrecy, they caught both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities by surprise. Predictably, the Bab al-Shams spawned two similar initiatives shortly afterwards.

However, the momentum soon disappeared, and Bab al-Shams suffered the same fate as other youth-led mobilizing efforts in the West Bank recently. They all fizzled out, failing to trigger sustained and more widespread contention despite being popular causes.⁵

This article tries to explain why Palestinian youth activists fail to instigate mass mobilization, despite their often energetic efforts. For this question to have any meaning, we must of course first establish that there are reasons why Palestinian youth should be able to mobilize widely. Such reasons do exist, but let me make it clear at the outset that they are not principally connected to the Arab youth revolts in 2011. The Palestinian situation is very different from those of Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries where youth were at the forefront of popular protests. Young Palestinians have grown up being under occupation, and the Palestinian political climate is defined by the national resistance struggle against the Israeli state. Palestinians were enthusiastic spectators rather than participants in the so-called Arab Spring. As I show below, the reason why one would have expected a vigorous youth movement to appear is instead connected to the history of Palestinian youth activism – they were at the forefront of both the first and the second intifadas – and the current situation, which bears comparison to the period directly preceding the first intifada, and to other contexts that produced a mass uprising. There are networks of Palestinian youth activists in the West Bank today, and there is widespread frustration in Palestinian society. Why has it not translated into contentious action?

The favored, commonsensical explanation among many observers is that Palestinian youth is characterized by disillusionment and political apathy.⁶ This is certainly true to some extent. 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.⁷ However, such claims do not really explain the lack of mass mobilization. It is pertinent to recall here that the first intifada erupted suddenly and unexpectedly for most, in an atmosphere of utter disillusionment and alienation.⁸ Marwan Khawaja has shown that increased Israeli repression during the period from 1976-1985 in fact intensified Palestinian resistance in the same period.⁹ The fatigue explanation also does not correspond with the perception of Palestinian youth

themselves. In a recent survey of 400 youth in OPT, only 26 per cent agreed with the statement "Palestinian youth are not interested in politics", while 74 per cent disagreed.¹⁰ 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.

I argue that a deeper, less idiographic understanding of Palestinian demobilization, emerges when we employ concepts from the contentious politics analytical framework. In a recent contribution Beinun and Vairel emphasize the importance of context, network and practices to explain mobilization – and, notably, demobilization – in the Middle East and North Africa.¹¹ While the first two variables are, as I show below, eminently suited to make sense of the demobilization among Palestinian youth, it seems to me that both the Arab Spring and the current Palestinian context indicate that the issue of *framing* should be given greater attention. The simplicity of the slogan in the Arab Spring (dignity, bread and social justice) was what made it so forceful. The Palestinian case, on the other hand, highlights the difficulties in formulating a forceful frame when the political situation is utterly complex. The lack of a unifying frame for action is, I think, a central part of any explanation of the lack of Palestinian grassroots mobilization.

According to this conceptual scheme, the analysis below deals with the Palestinian political context, its network structure and how those two variables makes it difficult for youth activists to frame their activism in a convincing way. The analysis is based primarily on interviews with activists and observers in the West Bank during fall 2011 and spring 2013.¹² In addition, a small survey of 400 randomly sampled youth in the West Bank and Gaza conducted in December 2011 is relied upon to provide a wider picture. News reports from independent Palestinian media and activist web sites also form an important part of the source material. It is important to emphasize that the article deals with West Bank youth activism only. The situation for youth activists in the Gaza Strip is different, and arguably even more difficult. This author tried repeatedly to gain access to Gaza while on fieldwork in Occupied Palestine, but was denied entry by the Hamas authorities. The resulting lack of data led to Gaza youth being excluded from the research.

Background: heavy clouds but no rain

The Bab al-Shams episode recounted above was in fact part of a chain of youth-led activism in the West Bank that has become steadily more visible during the last five years. Building on the village protests in the West Bank that have taken place since 2003 to protest against the separation barrier, and informed also by the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, young Palestinian activists have made a clean break with the Palestinian Liberation Organization's policy of pursuing national liberation through bilateral negotiations in the so-called Oslo peace process. Scrapping negotiations, and 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. These youth come from several different political factions, a fact they attach much significance to: Their activism takes place independently from the political leaderships of the various Palestinian organizations and at the same time mounts a challenge to their less than vigorous resistance to the continued occupation and grabbing of Palestinian land. They have also engaged in explicit criticism of the Fatah and Hamas leadership. In March 2011, youth from the West Bank and Gaza organized big demonstrations against the split between Gaza and the West Bank under the slogan "the people want the division to end." Thousands of people gathered in Gaza and Ramallah, and there was optimistic talk of a uniquely Palestinian spring.

Looking at the history of Palestinian youth activism one would expect these efforts to meet with at least some degree of success. In the 1980s, a largely youth-led popular movement emerged out of the universities and trade unions and led the efforts of the first intifada from 1987. Explanations of the outbreak of the intifada include key components that are just as salient today as they were then: a sense of standstill and loss of direction in the political process¹³; rapid growth in settlements on Palestinian land¹⁴; a youth bulge combined with economic decline; and no prospects for improvement.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

In other words, a large bundle of threats was central to the mobilization during the late 1980s. Today, these threats have certainly not grown smaller. Activists and observers agree that the situation has never been bleaker than in the 2000s. The Palestinian elite is divided, the quasi-statelets in the West Bank and Gaza are weak and face serious financial difficulties, and they have experienced a loss of legitimacy among the young because of their corruption and constant bickering. In terms of the Israeli occupation, 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.¹⁷ 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 2012.¹⁸ 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 young Palestinians. To these threats to security are added economic threats. While access to the Israeli job market has become steadily more limited, there has been a 30 per cent increase in the population of the West Bank between 1997 and 2007.¹⁹ The World Bank recently calculated that youth unemployment (among 15-29-year-olds) was 43.5 percent in Gaza and 25.9 percent in the West Bank.²⁰ 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 fact, in many ways the current situation resembles not only that preceding the first intifada, but also relevant aspects of Soviet society immediately before popular contention caused the downfall of the Communist republic, as described by Goldstone:

“[T]he Soviet Union in the 1980s revealed all the major trends typical of a society headed for revolution: a weakening state hamstrung by economic and political failure; an elite sharply divided over how to respond to the state's problems and with a vast number of educated and talented but frustrated aspirants to elite positions who had come to reject the legitimacy of the leadership and the system that maintained it; and a population suffering marked declines in living standards...”²¹

Yet for all these similarities with two other contexts that contributed to producing mass mobilization, recent years have seen remarkably little mass mobilization in occupied Palestine. Bab al-Shams itself exemplifies the current limits of the popular resistance. While it may have grown into a bigger episode involving thousands of activists if it had been allowed to remain for one more day, in the event, only around 200 activists actually spent their nights there (some 2,000 others reportedly visited during daytime). The next two villages had fewer participants. And this picture is a recurring one during recent years of popular resistance in the West Bank. There are many acts of contention – stone-throwing against Israeli soldiers, sit-ins, hunger strikes by prisoners in Israeli detention centers, demonstrations and marches. Employing the quarterly chronology of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* from 16 November 2010 to 15 November 2011, I counted 248 demonstrations, rallies or marches, mostly in the West Bank.²² However, these incidents are scattered around the West Bank, often with little coordination between the organizers, and as a rule only a handful of people participate in each. The 15 March initiative was certainly an exception, as it gathered thousands of people, but the momentum did not last, and Fatah managed to portray it as their own idea in the West Bank, severely discrediting the initiative.²³

What hinders youth mobilization today? In line with Tarrow's approach to social movements,²⁴ I will consider three variables below: The unusual Palestinian political system, the role of networks in impeding mobilization, and the resulting difficulties in framing a powerful message.

The Palestinian political context

It is an established insight that political realignment and splits within the elite present opportunities for challengers or new contenders in the political system.²⁵ As Koopmans puts it, elite factions “may choose to mobilize popular support in order to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* rival elites, either by directly sponsoring or even initiating protest campaigns, or by encouraging dissent in more subtle ways.”²⁶ Such dynamics commonly occur when the regime is contested and the political situation is volatile. On the surface, it would seem that the West Bank provides propitious ground for the young political challengers that have appeared during the last few years. Fatah, the main nationalist organization which is closely associated with the Palestinian National Authority, is an organization in crisis. Bröning noted in 2011 that “[i]n a movement that had been

characterised by the activism of its youth since the outbreak of the *Intifada*, most members of the Central Committee were well beyond the age of 65.”²⁷ The sixth Fatah’s general assembly in 2009 – the first since 1989 – attempted to deal with host of problems that beset the organization: a democracy deficit, elderly leadership, the need for internal party reform, and the issue of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. One year later, the aborted 2010 local elections showed how badly organized the movement was. Local Fatah councils could not agree on unified lists, but were plagued by local differences, family feuds and personal attempts at gain.²⁸ Several Fatah activists on the grassroots acknowledge the problems and have no inhibitions against criticizing the leadership, which is accused of being disconnected from society.²⁹

Added to this is the paralyzing split between Fatah and Hamas. Since Hamas took control over the Gaza strip after a unity government broke down in 2007, the two organizations have each run their own Palestinian quasi-statelets, one in the West Bank and the other in Gaza. Despite much rhetoric about reconciliation, neither organization has been willing to compromise, much to the despair of ordinary Palestinians in general and intellectuals and opinion leaders in particular. In short, Fatah is divided internally, and there is a more serious division between Fatah and Hamas, the two main nationalist movements.

In the 1980s, disarray at elite level paved the way for a youth movement that transformed Palestinian politics. The political body that aspired to represent the Palestinians in both the territories and elsewhere, the PLO, had been in tatters since its expulsion from Lebanon in 1982. In the institutional vacuum in the West Bank and Gaza, a diverse and decentralized grassroots network of committees, unions, health and welfare organizations grew up. 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.³⁰

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.³¹

What hinders young activists today from exploiting elite splits and organizational disarray to further their own aims? The answer is that a version of classic Arab neo-patrimonialism arrived in Palestine when the exiled PLO leadership returned to the Occupied Territories after the Oslo accords in 1993. Under Yasir Arafat, a clientelist system was established as he tried to keep the various factions of the PLO, armed groups and clan leaders under control.³² As for the main Palestinian liberation organization, Fatah, of which Arafat was also chairman, it became closely associated with the PNA after 1994, with obvious tension between this role as state-supporting party and its role as a liberation movement. One immediate consequence was the damage done to internal and national democracy.³³ Made up to a large extent of Fatah elite, the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank has been marked by the need to assert control, especially after the split with Hamas in 2007. The result is that the culture of democratic, cross-factional grassroots activism of the 1980s has been lost. Instead, a “culture of fear” has come to dominate the political climate in the West Bank, as the International Crisis Group put it.³⁴ Suppression of dissent is not limited to Hamas sympathizers, but also extends to other groups. A former leftist activist continuously lost jobs because of his affiliation to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP):

[W]hen the intelligence [service] learned that I was PFLP, I was fired. This also happened [to me] with another job. Once I got a job in a bank, but the PA put down their foot, although the bank had accepted me already and I in a way had got the job. But I lost it again when the PA interfered.³⁵

The result of Fatah’s (and, in Gaza, Hamas’s) policies is a politically fragmented and paralyzed society. This reality makes it difficult to mobilize, unless mobilization takes place under the Fatah umbrella. 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.³⁶

The contrast to 2011 is striking. The emergence of the repressive PA and Hamas governments 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 two predatory statelets.

There has thus been a fundamental change in the Palestinian political opportunity structure. From having to contend only with the Israeli state as an adversary, 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. Since 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 three.

For young political challengers in the West Bank, two significant difficulties arise from this fact. First, there are clear limits on even non-violent mobilization against the Israeli occupation, since such mobilization can be seen as indirect criticism of the Fatah elite's policies. Thus, demonstrations against naturalization with the occupier and protest marches on Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank are frowned upon by the PNA and sometimes repressed by force. For example, during a demonstration against Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in July 2012, PNA 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."³⁷ The PNA also uses more subtle methods to defuse criticism. During the run-up to the March 15 demonstrations in 2011, in which youth demanded that Hamas and Fatah end their differences and achieve national unity, the PNA reportedly co-opted the demonstrations with significant success, using both infiltrators and direct contact with the organizers. The result was that many young people saw the March 15 demonstration as a "Fatah" event and therefore dismissed it as disingenuous.

The second difficulty is that Fatah and the PNA are not merely the governing forces of the West Bank – they are also the official representatives of the Palestinian people's resistance against occupation. Criticism of them may further divide and weaken the resistance, which is no desirable outcome for any Palestinian. Criticism of President Mahmoud Abbas can be heard at any private gathering, but publicly people are more cautious. Youth activists who argue for fundamental reform within the Palestinian polity, run into these inhibitions on the part of most Palestinians.

Networks: Too strong and too weak

The clientelist structure of Palestinian politics combines with a long-standing tradition of factionalism to impede the youth's attempts at mobilizing against their deteriorating situation. At the same time, existing cross-factional youth networks are not mature enough to mount a serious challenge to the established political players.

The perhaps most important impediment to the evolution of the youth networks is the existence of strong vertical networks in the political organizations and the culture of factionalism in Palestinian society. In order to understand this point, it is necessary to be aware of how deep factionalism is embedded in Palestinian society. An International Crisis Group report put the matter succinctly: "[e]veryone is either affiliated with a political movement to some degree or labelled as such."³⁸ Several of the youth I interviewed for this study complained that it was impossible to carve out a space independently of one of the factions. Even if they tried, others would inevitably view them as belonging to this or that faction based on their families' known affiliation.³⁹ Consequently, it seems nearly impossible to assume an independent position from which to voice criticism in Palestinian society, and this severely detracts from the credibility of new initiatives or claims. Factionalism impedes any new political initiative because it is likely to be framed as one existing faction's attempt at discrediting or sabotaging another. The youth are caught in a web of factions and allegiances. This situation has an interesting parallel in Lebanon, the perhaps most factionalized country in the Middle East. Analyzing the limited success of the youth movement that struggled against sectarianism, Charles Tripp succinctly observes that "they were too much part of the very thing they were trying to resist."⁴⁰ The same can be said of Palestinian youth activ-

ists, who remain caught up in a patriarchal political system. Thus, during interviews the activists who advocate reforms of the PLO were dismissed out of hand as pawns of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) by many of their peers. Conversely, the 15 March group of activists, who included many of those accused of running the PFLP's errand, was accused of being a tool of Fatah to discredit Hamas.

The culture of factionalism works together with the hierarchical political organizations to create networks that keep young people from influencing the elite. The marginalization of youth is evident in all the parties, and is connected to the crisis of representation in Palestinian politics. Shortly stated, an elite of elderly men keep younger activists and politicians from gaining influence. In the political organizations, communication is very much top-down. When interviewing Fatah student leaders in their mid-twenties at Bethlehem University, for example, I was told that they were occupied solely with service provision to the students. Political activism was subject to initiatives from the central Fatah Youth leadership in Ramallah, whom they very rarely heard from.⁴¹ A 30-year-old prominent Fatah activist in Aida refugee camp outside Bethlehem related that when the PNA engaged in dialogues with representatives of all layers of Palestinian society some years back, the so-called youth delegation consisted of men in their fifties and sixties. It was only after intense pressure from Fatah Youth activists that the administration relented and included people who were actually young in the meeting.⁴²

Very few young people get recruited into leadership positions – the term “youth leaders” in Palestinian parlance today often refers to people in their 50s, like the imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti. The situation is apparently similar in all the political parties, but it is especially detrimental to mobilization in Fatah, since it is by far the biggest and most important one. In the words of Nathan Brown, Fatah today consists of “an aging old guard monopolizing top positions, a middle generation that stands in the wings (and is no more unified than the old guard), and a host of local branches whose links to the center are tenuous.”⁴³ Independent-minded Palestinian activists in the West Bank could bypass this vertical network in the 1980s because the political elite were in exile in Beirut and Tunisia. At present, however, the patron-client networks have been moved to the Occupied Territories and cannot be bypassed without incurring the wrath and sanctions of the system. Together, the vertical trust networks of the political organizations and the culture of factionalism in the Occupied Territories ensure a tight system of social and political control on youth activists in general and independent activists in particular.

Nevertheless, there are a number of youth networks in the West Bank that engage in sustained interaction with local and central Palestinian authorities, and there is evidence that these networks are growing. A few examples: In the Bethlehem area, where I lived during fieldwork, a new youth center had just been established in Duhaysha refugee camp. The director, a 27-year-old woman, spoke enthusiastically about the center's ambition to facilitate contact between camp youths in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon through a new digital media program. At the same time, she was strongly supportive of the local camp youth's protest against the camp committee's decision to accept paying electricity bills – a contentious issue that affects the refugees' political status and identity. In Hebron, local youths have established a successful campaign against the Israeli settler presence in that city and the sufferings it leads to for the local inhabitants. The success can be measured by the Israeli responses to the campaign: In March 2013, after a protest march in which thousands of Palestinians took part, the main organizer of the campaign, Isa Amr, was arrested and condemned by a military court to stay away from central Hebron, where his campaign headquarters lies. In Ramallah, there are several networks of young activists that have engaged in demonstrations against the political division between Gaza and the West Bank, and PNA policies of naturalization with Israel. When former Israeli Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz was invited to the West Bank in July 2012, the youth network “Palestinians for Dignity” called for protests which were violently attacked by Palestinian security forces. Youth groups have also demonstrated against the Oslo agreements, the Paris protocol, and NGOs that accept support from the USA.

A defining characteristic of these networks is their dislike of the paternalistic structure of the established political factions, where obedience to the leadership is demanded. Self-consciously, the youth activists I met avoid developing a hierarchical organization, preferring to discuss their way forward in a flat organizational structure. They share this attitude with their peers in other Arab countries; a defining characteristic of the Tunisian and Egyptian youth protests in 2011 was their insistence on a flat structure and open discussion. The flip side of this eschewal of top-down political structures, especially among youth that have little organizational training, is that coordination is scant and that decision-making processes become fragmented. Consequently, the independent networks of youth activists 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.

But a process of integration is taking place. The coordinator of the well-established grassroots organization *Stop the Wall*, Jamal Jum'a, admitted that the organization had not addressed youth to a sufficient degree, but that this was changing. Since 2006, the organization has focused on engaging youth, and it supports the independent youth activists without trying to co-opt them.⁴⁴ This connection between independent youth and a well-established campaign with a network all over the West Bank is one indication of increased integration. Another such integrative channel is provided by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign that was started in 2003 as a means of non-violent resistance against Israeli occupation, and in which Palestinians as well as international solidarity activists are engaged. A central Ramallah-based activist stated that it was this campaign that inspired him to join the resistance struggle. Today he is an important figure in the networks that struggle against naturalization with Israel and for PLO reform.⁴⁵

The Bab al-Shams incident with which I introduced this article illustrates the evolving nature of these networks particularly well. I met activists in their early and mid-20s in Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron who had got to know about the initiative through trusted friends. Traveling to Bab al-Shams, many of them met for the first time like-minded activists from other parts of the West Bank. Bab al-Shams provided them with an important opportunity to establish new contacts and engage in discussions about the path for future resistance. For the first time, these young activists were able to discuss freely future strategies and political choices in an atmosphere free of factional tensions and competition.⁴⁶

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. Some of them are severely critical of their own organization, but not to the extent that they want to leave it. Instead, they participate in grassroots activities together with youth from other factions and independents. Several of the organizers of Bab al-Shams were prominent young Fatah activists. Moreover, there is awareness among the top echelons in Fatah that they need to give their young activists more space and influence.⁴⁷ This point is important because factionalism is an obstacle to the independent youth's attempt at mobilizing, as argued above. Young Fatah activists' willingness to engage with and cooperate with others creates a more constructive political atmosphere among the young generation of political activists. In addition, it has the potential to influence the way Fatah activists view and work within their own organization. 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.

The fact remains, however, that youth activism and mobilization is in many ways a transitory phenomenon. Today's teens and students will be established adults with family and work responsibilities tomorrow. If they do not get incorporated into some kind of institution there is little to keep them active, and the political potential of such networks, as discussed in the Polish case by Tarrow, disappears.⁴⁸ This is the scenario that currently seems to await West Bank youth activists. In face of the older generation's unwillingness to relinquish power and privileges, the ones who are active within Fatah have little to gain by continuing their activism, while those outside do not have an institution to hold them together when they transition to adulthood. A former leftist activist explained why he had felt compelled to refrain from taking active part in resistance activism once he established a family, contrasting today's situation with the mass solidarity of the first intifada:

The first intifada, it was perfect... Right now, if I go to jail or I die, who is going to feed my family? (...) This is a problem. During the first intifada, we had a system which protected all of that. Now we are not protected, we are vulnerable. (...) The Ministry of Social Affairs gives families [of arrested or killed activists] about 200 shekels a month for three months [laughs]. And you have to struggle to get it!⁴⁹

At the same time, the leading youth activists, most of them in their 20s and early 30s, do not seem able to mobilize their younger peers, or the next generation of youth. A recent report documents that teenagers and youth in their early 20s are for the most part either uninterested in or disillusioned with any form of political activism. They do not believe they can contribute to any change, and think the price to pay for activism (harassment and possibly detainment by Palestinian or Israeli security forces) is too high.⁵⁰ My interviews with teenagers reflected the same apathy or

disillusion. This simultaneous failure to extend activism into adulthood and recruit new youth activists detracts from the youth activists' ability to keep up a sustained interaction with either Israeli or Palestinian authorities, and so the probability of these networks evolving into a social movement is slim.⁵¹

The difficulty in formulating a coherent frame

The literature on framing draws attention to the way movements formulate the aims of their activism so that they resonate with the culture around them and people's experiences.⁵² Frames "focus attention by punctuating or specifying what in our sensual field is relevant and what is irrelevant, what is 'in frame' and what is 'out of frame'."⁵³ By creating such frames that simplify and distil a political reality for mobilization purposes, they are able to galvanize bystanders into actions and neutralize opponents.

The independent youth are certainly well attuned to the culture around them. Their activism is simple, concrete and popular among Palestinians. One example is the recent "settlements," like Bab al-Shams, that establish Palestinian "facts on the ground". Another is the "Open Shuhada Street" campaign, run by the Youth Against Settlements group, which each year gathers thousands of demonstrators to protest against the permanent closure of Shuhada Street in central Hebron as a result of the presence of Israeli settlers in the center of the city.⁵⁴ Initiatives such as these receive much coverage in the local press and have the full support of ordinary Palestinians.

However, these youth face difficulties when trying to formulate a frame that would imbue their initiatives with meaning and encourage bystanders to join the bandwagon. The main reason for this is not that they are inept at political communication, but the existence of a warped political structure in the West Bank that makes it difficult for independent youth to formulate a simple, coherent and compelling message that accompanies their activism. A comparison with the first intifada is instructive to illustrate this problem of framing. At the time of its outbreak in 1987, the powerful frame that ignited mass mobilization all over the occupied territories was that of a popular, grassroots resistance movement against occupation and continuous encroachment on Palestinian land. It was easy to identify what was wrong (the diagnostic frame) and it was unproblematic to single out the target for mobilization and how to confront it (the prognostic frame). The Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza at the time were united against a single enemy, and in the absence of an effective national movement the emerging grassroots movement enjoyed sufficient credibility to be able to motivate ordinary people to participate in the intifada against the Israeli occupation.

Today the situation is much more complex. Young people have legitimate grievances against not only the Israeli occupation, but also their own quasi-governments in the West Bank and Gaza, which have failed to provide either peace or economic and social security. With the advent of the PNA, which is supposed to represent the Palestinians and govern them, the traditional frame of popular, street-led resistance against the occupation has lost much of the power to mobilize on the grassroots. Instead, confusion and frustration has taken hold as young Palestinians see that they are left powerless in a game between the occupying power and a corrupt and increasingly authoritarian leadership. Feelings of confusion and frustration were common among the activists and ordinary youth I interviewed throughout the West Bank in 2013, and the reason was the overwhelming mass of immediate and more long-term political and social problems youth feel they face. For example, when talking with a group of youth activists in Duhaysha refugee camp outside Bethlehem who were involved in a project about redefining the refugee, there was a palpable sense of alienation and a need to rediscover who they were, before there could be any talk of political activism. One of the participants, a disillusioned, former Fatah youth activist, expressed it in this way:

A fundamental aim of the project is to find new ways of representing the refugee. Over the course of more than 60 years the narrative about the refugees has not changed. My father and little brother narrate basically the same story. (...) We don't have any magical solutions, of course. (...) To make any changes, we have to start talking about the things we want to change.⁵⁵

There are also, of course, youth activists who are actively involved in the resistance struggle. However, they are far from united in regard to questions about strategies and main targets. 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 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.⁵⁶

This is a powerful, simple and clear message. It makes it plain what is wrong, namely that top Palestinian politicians do not adequately represent the local and global community of Palestinians, and that they are not held accountable for their inefficiency in dealing with the deteriorating political situation in occupied Palestine. It also provides a solution that is appealing to many, not least in the young generation: a regeneration of the PLO that would give voice not only to people below 60 years, but also to Palestinians in the diaspora, who have been sidelined since the Oslo process started. This would facilitate renewed unity and solidarity among Palestinians across borders.

The problem, however, lies in the motivating force of the claim as well as its credibility, and thus its ability to galvanize the many Palestinian youth who are frustrated bystanders in national politics. First, the frame lacks immediacy, which detracts from its power to mobilize. Reforming the PLO by reviving the Palestinian National Council would be a long-winded process riddled with uncertainties. The task of unifying the Palestinian nation is no less daunting. While few Palestinians would disagree with the claim that the diaspora in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and elsewhere should be better represented, the practicalities of such a reform would be quite complex, not least in light of the separate political systems that have developed in the refugee camps.

Third, the very idea of young activists challenging the elite seems hopeless to engaged youth and just wrong to a surprising number of those surveyed. In my interviews with young activists who are critical towards the West Bank elite, it emerged that they simply do not believe that youth are able to influence national politics. The interviews show a deep-seated belief among youth that the elite is able to appropriate every initiative taken by grassroots activists and use it to their own advantage rather than in the cause of liberation:

They [the seniors] say that we're with you, we support this and that initiative – but everything becomes little more than exploitation of youth activism. The idea comes from the youth, and the older generation exploits it for its own benefit.⁵⁷

As for the views of ordinary Palestinian youth, surprisingly, given the dire situation in the West Bank and the manifest patriarchal political system, the survey results suggest that many of them dislike the notion of criticizing their elders: only 45 per cent of 197 respondents in the West Bank agreed with the statement “young people are doing the right thing when they organize demonstrations criticizing the older generation in Fatah and Hamas.” Thirty-nine per cent disagreed. These figures are intriguing, but there is no space to pursue their implications further here. The point is that the critical, reformist frame does not seem to catch on either among activists or bystanders. David A. Snow's notion of discursive opportunity structures seems to me useful to invoke here: The political constraints on activist discourse are simply too strict that youth activists have managed to work out coherent and convincing frames for their initiatives.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Palestinian youth activists have so far failed to mobilize widely for their efforts to struggle against occupation and provide an alternative to the staid politics of the established factions. The Palestinian political system does not provide them with sufficient opportunity structures to carve out a space for themselves on the national political scene; their organizational and personal networks are too loose to stand up to factionalism and the vertical trust networks of the political organizations; and the complex political realities make it difficult to formulate a coherent and convincing frame for their activism. Overall, these energetic youth have not yet managed to overcome the atmosphere of frustration that pervades the Palestinian youth segment.

These conclusions have important implications for the prospects of any new popular uprising in the West Bank. *If* a third intifada should occur these findings suggest one important way it would differ from the first, successful one in 1987. In the 1980s, young workers and students were crucial in establishing strong grassroots networks that organized society effectively when the strikes and confrontations with the Israeli military began. Today there are no such networks of young people because the dedicated grassroots activists are being oppressed by their older leaders. In the absence of strong grassroots networks of young people, any new uprising is likely to be more chaotic and less effective than the first intifada.

In a regional light, while the Palestinian experience is unique in the region, many of its dynamics are not. The analysis strengthens Beinín and Vairel's claim that contexts and networks are crucial factors for making sense of Middle Eastern protest movements.⁵⁹ As youth all over the Arab world are being pushed to the margins of the political transitions they initiated, the relevance of the Palestinian experience, especially with regard to context, networks and framing, is apparent.

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