Fatah from Below: Neopatriarchy and the Clash of Generations in Palestine

Abstract

In the post-Oslo political order in the West Bank, the top echelons of Fatah and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) have become entangled to the extent that the lines between them are blurred. Under the governance of this Fatah/PNA grouping, West Bank politics are characterized by authoritarianism, factionalism, and an accommodating policy vis-à-vis the Israeli occupying power, particularly in the domain of security. These characteristics have alienated the young, including Fatah’s own members, from Palestinian politics, and dissatisfaction with the leadership leads to a leaderless popular resistance on the one hand, and destructive, spontaneous outbursts of violence on the other.

This report argues that the policies pursued by the Fatah elite/PNA are symptoms of a neopatriarchal political culture, as such a system was described by Hisham Sharabi nearly three decades ago. This culture results in political and social impotence, and liberation from the colonizer – in this case Israel – will not by itself improve the dysfunctional political organization of Palestinian society. Palestinians will remain weak and dependent on outside forces, unless the elite take steps to dismantle the political culture of factionalism, start listening to grassroots activists, and put an end to internal repression.

Change in the political culture has to come from within. There are, however, some steps outside actors such as Norway may take to limit the negative effects of the current Fatah/PNA policies and encourage positive change:

- Put pressure on Hamas and Fatah to reconcile in a meaningful way that entails real cooperation and coordination between them;
- Channel more of the aid away from capacity-building workshops and the like, and direct it instead to grassroots community centers, especially in West Bank refugee camps, as they are the frontline in the struggle against social fragmentation and political chaos;
- Press the Palestinian political elite to revive the PLO as a representative organization for all Palestinians by holding new elections to the Palestinian National Council;
- Support the well-organized initiatives that have sprung up as a reaction to political lethargy at the elite level, first and foremost by engaging with the Boycott, Divestment...
and Sanctions National Committee (BNC), which is a democratic, pluralist and representative Palestinian political body committed to non-violent resistance against occupation.

Introduction

On 12 June 2014, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped near a settlement in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. There is evidence that Israeli authorities knew that the teenagers had been killed shortly after their abduction, but they nevertheless put in motion a large-scale operation to find them. As Israeli military forces conducted house raids, mass arrests and searches in the West Bank (the youths were found dead on 30 June), Mahmoud Abbas gave a speech at the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Saudi Arabia, where he pledged to help Israel find the teenagers. He used the occasion to confirm his support for security coordination between the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah (PNA) and Israel:

The government believes in security coordination between us and Israel. (...) Of course, there are those who rebuke and accuse us regarding the security cooperation, but it is in our interest (...) to have security coordination with the Israelis in order to defend ourselves, in order to protect our people. ¹

His comments did not go down well with most Palestinians in the West Bank. Reacting to Abbas’s statement, one young Fatah activist commented that «the leadership talks about reason and logic, but where is the reason and logic in living under occupation without resisting?»² Angered by the Israeli military’s closure and search of refugee camps across the West Bank, a grassroots Fatah activist in the Bethlehem area posted a comment on her Facebook page, saying, «We dedicate the terror of our children in Dhuhaysha (refugee camp) to His excellency President Mahmoud Abbas.»³

The conflict over security cooperation with Israel is the most dramatic, but not the only, sign of a damaging divide between the Fatah leadership and its grassroots activists. Looking at the West Bank today, one notices a striking contrast between the feebleness of the Palestinian leadership towards Israel and the United States, and its heavy-handed authoritarian policies towards its own population. This combination of impotency and authoritarianism is one of the hallmarks of a neopatriarchal political order, a concept developed by the late Palestinian intellectual Hisham Sharabi.⁴ In this report, I employ Sharabi’s theory to connect three aspects of the policies of the Fatah leadership/PNA: patriarchal and authoritarian governance, factionalism, and accommodation with the Israeli occupying power. I argue that this elite political culture has damaging effects on the popular struggle for liberation. Although this problem is first and foremost a Palestinian one, I suggest four measures that outside actors may take to encourage a more inclusive and powerful form of national resistance struggle than the political elites are currently capable of offering.

³ In a Facebook post on 20 June 2014. Name withheld to protect anonymity.
Let me note two important disclaimers. First, I restrict the investigation to the internal West Bank situation and the Fatah elite/PNA’s policies. There is no reason to believe that Hamas has not alienated many Gazans by its form of governance over the last seven years, but as I have not had access to Gaza for this study, I have too little empirical material to include it in this report. Second, I do not by any means claim to provide a full answer to these questions. Israeli occupation policies, the Palestinian dependency on the international community, and the political struggle between Fatah and Hamas are of course important factors when explaining Palestinian politics, and there is no lack of articles and books about these issues. However, intra-Palestinian politics and the question of how representative the Palestinian leadership is are important parts of the picture that are often treated only in passing, and that deserve more attention.

The analysis is based primarily on interviews with activists and observers in the West Bank from fall 2011 to fall 2013. Fieldwork of varying length (from one week to four months) was carried out at different intervals during this period. The author stayed in Jerusalem during short stays and in the West Bank village of Beit Jala (close to Bethlehem) from late December 2012 to early May 2013. During these stays, I traveled around the West Bank meeting activists and ordinary university-aged youth, from Nablus in the north to Hebron in the south. Interviewees were selected based on snowballing. Starting with leaders of community centers in refugee camps and NGOs in Palestinian towns, I identified other activists with less formal organizational attachments. I also took care to interview young people who were interested in politics but had chosen to stay away, citing fear or disillusionment. All in all, I conducted thirty-three tape-recorded interviews. Akram Atallah of Fafo’s Bethlehem office set up and participated in several of the interviews. A respected former activist and political analyst, he helped me gain access to interview objects who would otherwise have been hard to approach as an outsider. I also witnessed and sometimes participated in contentious events like demonstrations, prayer meetings at a site threatened by annexation, disruptions of meetings, and stone-throwing against Israeli soldiers. News reports from independent Palestinian media and activist web sites also form an important part of the source material. The data includes interviews and news reports from October 2011 to February 2014. Palestinian activism relies heavily on Facebook for the sharing of news and viewpoints, and data from Facebook has been used as background material, but I have chosen not to quote directly from Facebook posts due to the semi-private nature of several of the profiles in question. Interviews with activists who spoke fluent English were conducted in English; other interviews were conducted in Arabic. The English translations that appear in this article are my own.

Authoritarian governance and marginalization of youth and women

The Palestinian National Authority has been characterized as becoming increasingly authoritarian under Abbas, not least as a result of security sector reform. Briefly stated, by

---

5 Where only the first name of an informant is given, the name has been altered to protect his/her anonymity.
6 Needless to say, I never participated in acts of the latter two kinds.
associating itself so closely with the Palestinian National Authority as to blur the boundaries between them, the Fatah leadership has gone from leading the resistance to governing in a repressive manner.

When Fatah was founded in 1959, it was a militant, nationalist organization, committed to armed resistance against Israel in order to liberate all Palestinian lands. Pragmatism led to a gradual change in the movement’s tactics and positions, but the fundamental transformation occurred after 1993, with the new Palestinian political structure that resulted from the Oslo process. The Oslo accords put in place a Palestinian parastate that was meant to evolve into a sovereign state by the end of the interim period. The Palestinian elite and the international community cooperated in creating a state-like entity, complete with a legislative council, ministries and governmental agencies. Fatah’s dominance in Palestinian politics is such that the institutions of the PNA are virtually indistinguishable from the top echelon of Fatah. In other words, the Fatah elite is the backbone of the PNA.

As a result of the Oslo process, Yasir Arafat and the Fatah elite went from resistance to governance (the second intifada from 2000-2005 notwithstanding). Under Abbas, the conflation of Fatah and the PNA has largely continued, despite attempts at political and security reform. How does this PNA proto-state rule? It quickly acquired several of the characteristics of the classic Arab authoritarian security state. From the outset, power was concentrated in the executive, meaning Yasir Arafat, in a type of rule that has been described as “neopatrimonial,” meaning that “formal lines of responsibility are (...) overwritten by patronage and clientalism.” While Mahmoud Abbas’s reforms and former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s launch of a state-building project reduced the personalized dimension of Palestinian politics that characterized Arafat’s style, the PNA under Abbas has proven no less authoritarian than under Arafat, particularly in the way he employs the Palestinian Security Forces against dissenters.

Since the 2007 division between Fatah and Hamas, Abbas has ruled by decree, having no mandate from the Palestinian Legislative Council. The PLC has in fact been rendered irrelevant since the split between Fatah and Hamas. There have been no national or local elections since 2006, barring the incomplete 2012 West Bank local elections. Abbas’s own
presidential term was supposed to end in 2009, so he is in reality an unelected president. Government is not rooted in institutional authority, but rather upheld by the use of force. The PNA relies heavily on its security forces, whose leaders are much despised among ordinary Palestinians on account of their arrogance and brutality. Repression of dissent ranges from crackdowns on critical media outlets to the harassment and detainment of individuals who oppose the regime.

While the top layers of Fatah have more or less merged with the PNA, lower-tier members have not. Fatah is a fractured and divided organization. As Nathan Brown puts it, an aging old guard monopolizes the top positions, a middle generation stands in the wings, and then there is a number of local branches that are only tenuously connected to the central organization. Fatah today is torn between a ruling elite that is first and foremost concerned with preserving the system and a large body of members who still regard themselves as belonging to a liberation organization. This divide is felt acutely by young grassroots activists, whose experiences directly contradict the discourse coming from the top of the organization. The issues of women’s rights and youth participation bear out this contradiction well.

Palestinian women, and not least young women, face widespread discrimination and violence, in contrast to official rhetoric on the subject. The official Fatah discourse on women may be represented by the comments of Nabil Shaath, the amiable top-level Fatah diplomat. In an interview in November 2013, he praised the achievements of young Palestinian women:

> Our women are excelling in education, in sports, in literature and other [fields]. (...) In any year of the high school certificate nine of the ten best students are women. And that again shows how change is taking place in a variety of ways but will eventually reflect itself in political activism.

His praise notwithstanding, “change” certainly has not taken place so far on the leadership level. The only woman in Fatah’s 23-member central committee got the position only because Muhammad Dahlan was expelled from the organization. In the Revolutionary Council, the Parliament of Fatah, 11 out of 128 delegates are women, less than 10 percent. Young women face far more serious problems than this, however, notably femicide – so-called honour killings where the family’s supposedly sullied honour is often just a pretext for other motives. Under PNA rule, the perpetrators go free or receive mild sentences. The political leadership has not addressed this problem properly, and young Fatah women are certainly not happy about the situation. A Fatah activist in her late twenties who was interviewed for this report used to campaign for women’s rights, but eventually grew disillusioned:

> There have been no new law proposals about women for the last five years, right? We’re supposed to be a democratic country, we talk about defending women and so on. When a girl goes to five organizations, and then the police, and then a shelter for 40 days, and nothing happens, and in the end, she is killed... I was frustrated. I don’t want to work specifically on women’s issues anymore, because it's all lies.

13 Brown, Are Palestinians Building a State?, 12.
14 Interview in Ramallah, 6 November 2013.
15 Interview in Bethlehem, 11 February 2013.
Sexual harassment is a growing problem in the West Bank today, according to feminist activists, and this is a step backwards in a society where the run-up to and actual activism of the first intifada greatly helped women gain a more equal role in society.\textsuperscript{16}

As for youth politics more generally, sections of the Fatah leadership do realize that they need to include the youth more. Nabil Shaath said as much during the interview referred to above. However, little has happened. Even when the youth take progressive initiatives, they are largely neglected. A good example is the Youth Parliament that several Fatah and leftist activists started in 2010-11. They organized an assembly with youth representatives from all over the West Bank to make the youth voice heard. Yet when the PNA invited different sections of society to dialogue meetings, including the “youth”, many of the people they wanted to invite were men in their 50s and 60s, while the youth Parliament was barely represented. A group of young Fatah activists objected fiercely and in the end managed to persuade Salam Fayyad’s office to invite real youths, but the story illustrates the thinking at the top level of the PNA and Fatah.

Even inside the youth organization of Fatah, the Shabiba, student activists outside the Ramallah headquarters experience a great distance between them and their leadership. By their own account, contact with the central leadership takes place only before the elections to the student senate at the various universities, when they are equipped with funding so they can provide student services in order to gain a majority of votes in the elections. During the rest of the year they do precious little, and do not engage in popular resistance activities, as it would fall outside their mandate – their task is restricted to providing services to the students, according to Fatah representatives I spoke with.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, within Fatah, relations are strictly vertical and young activists are not encouraged to take creative initiatives.

**Factionalism**

Factionalism in the sense I employ it here has to do with the relations and competition between the many Palestinian resistance organizations, such as Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP and the DFLP. It is a crucial element of Palestinian politics, and it is intertwined with family bonds. Factionalism is detrimental to the development of a unified national movement, but the leaders of the liberation organizations have not taken steps to end it. As Fatah is the most important Palestinian political organization, its leaders have a special responsibility for putting an end to a political culture that leads to fragmentation and political paralysis. However, there is no sign they are ready to take on that responsibility.

Today, factionalism is of course at its clearest and most relevant in the conflict between Fatah and Hamas. Hamas members and sympathizers in the West Bank face harassment and arrests and keep a very low profile as far as their political identity is concerned. However, the problem is more fundamental than the Fatah-Hamas conflict. Factionalism is endemic to Palestinian


\textsuperscript{17} Interview with two Fatah student politicians, Bethlehem, 4 February 2013.
internal politics, and it has a negative effect on young people's will to engage politically, including in Fatah itself. Together with two colleagues I gathered data for a report on youth engagement in politics in Palestine in 2011. We talked to several young people who experienced that doors were shut to them because of their own or their relatives' engagement in factions other than Fatah, notably the PFLP. Young Palestinians feel that they cannot escape association with one faction or another even if they try, because family members' history predetermines their place in the political landscape. Factionalism stifles creativity, criticism and cooperation. This is true of young Fatah activists no less than their counterparts in other movements. One ex-Fatah member who had been a prominent student politician put it this way:

Say you are Fatah, and the Popular Front [PFLP] took a good initiative which you encouraged – this would make you suspicious in the eyes of other Fatah members. There was this person who said, and I quote verbatim: "We support our leadership, regardless of whether they are right or wrong."¹⁸

In his view, the factions create a stifling political atmosphere. He himself quit Fatah because of his frustration with the blind obedience to the leadership. Older Fatah activists agree and voice their concern for younger members of the movement, like Muna Barbar, an important Fatah activist in Jerusalem and head of the PLO’s Supreme Council for Youth and Sports:

Factionalism killed them [the youth activists], destroyed their capacities. The membership in specific factions limited their capacity. The feeling of disappointment and frustration is from the faction itself. (...)

I for example am a Fatah girl. This disappointment nearly put an end to my voluntary work for society.¹⁹

Membership in factions tends to combine with patriarchal family structures to impede youthful critical engagement with politics. As a recent report from Sharek Youth Forum argued, family and traditional patterns of power in Palestinian society discourage young people from voicing their opinions freely.²⁰

The antagonisms inherent to factionalism are replicated inside Fatah, where factionalist logic combines with clientalism to fracture and weaken the organization. A recent example of this is the case of top-level Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan. Dahlan was head of PNA security in Gaza before 2007, and was one of the people who stepped in to lead the PNA when Yasir Arafat was confined to his compound in Ramallah during the second intifada. While still a prominent member of Fatah's Central Committee, he engaged in rivalry for leadership with President Mahmoud Abbas and Jibril Rajoub, also a Central Committee member and a long-term rival of Dahlan. After rounds of mutual recriminations, Dahlan was expelled from Fatah. However, it was not only he who was punished: Fatah purged itself of his known supporters and clients within the organization and replaced them with Abbas loyalists. Dahlan and his lower-level supporters had broken their moral obligations to the Fatah leadership “family” and were therefore punished by being excluded from the organization, losing their political rights and protection, which only the faction and not the state apparatus of the Palestinian Authority can provide. Dahlan fled to the Gulf, where he still resides. Rajoub expressed the factionalist logic

---

¹⁸ Interview with Muhammad, Phoenix center, Dhuhaysha refugee camp, 28 January 2013.
¹⁹ Interview with Muna Barbar, al-Ram, 1 April 2013.
succinctly in an interview: “It was discussed in the Central Committee and we decided to send him to Hell.”

Relations with the occupier

To the Palestinian leadership, one of the most challenging aspects of the Oslo accords was the security cooperation with Israel, under which Palestinian security forces were to cooperate with Israeli ones to identify and arrest persons who might pose a security threat to Israel. The Palestinian police force’s conflict between acting as a symbol of national liberation and coordinating with the Israeli security services created unbearable tensions, exemplified in pitched battles between Palestinian police and Israeli forces in the late 1990s. Cooperation of course ceased during the second intifada, but under Abbas and Salam Fayyad it was revitalized. Palestinian security forces have since been trained by US instructors in a program designed by Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, earning them the nickname “Dayton forces” among Palestinians. Praised by the US and Israel, these forces are detested by many Palestinians, as they are used against resistance activities that people regard as respectable nationalist endeavors, not least with the death of the peace process.

This issue has become a great liability for the PNA and the Fatah leadership, who are accused of cooperating with the enemy. The story that introduced this report is a good example. In their search for the three kidnapped Israeli young men, Israeli military forces raided the West Bank, smashing property, breaking into houses, etc. All the while, the PNA security forces stood idly by, letting the Israeli army raid areas that are ostensibly under Palestinian sovereignty.

Security coordination is arguably the most detested form of normalization (tatbi') between the occupier and the occupied, and the resistance against normalization is one of the cornerstones of popular Palestinian activism in the West Bank at present. However, security coordination is not the only form of normalization. Joint Israeli-Palestinian meetings on peace and dialogue in the West Bank and East Jerusalem regularly prompt counter-demonstrations. This author witnessed one such successful protest in East Jerusalem, where Fatah and other grassroots activists disrupted a closed Israeli-Palestinian peace seminar organized by NGOs from the two communities to such an extent that the meeting ended prematurely. The meeting was held at the Palestinian-owned Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem, whose management was clearly embarrassed by the commotion it stirred. The activists chanted slogans and also broke into the meeting to disrupt it as much as possible. It is not only political activity that has been targeted by anti-normalization activists: in 2013, plans to open a branch of the Israeli clothes retailer Fox in Ramallah were dropped following angry protest marches.

---

21 Interview with the author and group of researchers, Ramallah, 6 November 2013.
In addition to naturalization, many think the West Bank leaders have gone much too far in placating Israel during peace negotiations. This feeling was exacerbated by the publication of the so-called Palestine Papers, a cache of secret documents with detailed notes of communication and meetings between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. They showed the weakness of the Palestinian side and their willingness to make unheard-of compromises, such as relinquishing ten percent of the West Bank. None of those compromises had been floated among the Palestinian public, and the leaking of the papers prompted Palestinians to ask what right the Palestinian leadership had to represent them.25

The PNA, Fatah and neopatriarchy

To sum up the preceding sections, the Fatah leadership contributes to a situation where factional interests take precedence over the liberation struggle and even the rule of law; they rule largely by coercion and personalized power instead of sound political processes and institutions; and in the security sector they accommodate rather than struggle against the occupying Israeli state. Each of these three aspects of Fatah/PNA policy are core elements of neopatriarchy as described by Hisham Sharabi, and they may therefore be seen as integrated parts of a political culture in the Fatah elite rather than separate pieces of policies. The neopatriarchal order entails some very negative consequences in regard to political development in Palestine.

Hisham Sharabi’s thesis about neopatriarchy appeared in 1988 and offered a theory about why development in the Arab world was stunted in the social, political and economic domains.26 In short, Sharabi argued that the pre-modern patriarchal structure of Arab societies had simply been revamped by the modern (colonial and post-colonial) Arab authorities, and that the result was a society with the outer trappings of modernity, but in which the inner logic of the pre-modern, patriarchal sultanates reigned. For Sharabi, colonialism and imperialism have had crucial effects on the political development of paternalism in the Arab world. His thesis is that European domination introduced modern state institutions that were appropriated by the native patriarchal elites. They continued to rule through coercion and personalized power, but this was hidden behind the veneer of institutionalized politics that modern parliamentary and governmental structures provided. Paternalism, clientalism, family networks and coercion are what govern social relations in neopatriarchy, not the rule of law and institutions.

Neopatrimonialism, a concept that is related to neopatriarchy but more restricted, has been shown to form an important part of Palestinian (and Arab) politics.27 However, I do not argue that Sharabi’s theory as a whole necessarily holds true for the modern historical development of Palestinian society. Real people power, women’s rights and strong political organization have been evident at several points in time in the West Bank and Gaza strip, not least around the time of the first intifada in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the cultivation of factionalism, authoritarianism and deference to the colonizer (and its European and American supporters)

26 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy.
27 Brynen, “The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics.”
are so pronounced aspects of today’s Fatah/PNA governance in the West Bank that the comparison is worth making.

First, factionalism, which I described above, is a political expression of the kinship/religious kind of factionalism described by Sharabi. The effects are similar:

“In neopatriarchal society, a person is lost when cut off from the family, the clan, or the religious group. The state cannot replace these protective primary structures. Indeed, the state is an alien force that oppresses one, as is equally civil society, a jungle where only the rich and powerful are respected and recognized. In one’s actual practice one conducts oneself morally only within the primary structures (family-clan-sect); for the most part, one lives amorally “in the jungle”, in the society at large.”

There is no one-to-one relationship between Sharabi’s conception of factionalism and the reality of Palestinian political and social relations, not least because of the progressive politics that form part of the Palestinian political heritage, notably in the popular mobilization of the 1980s. But the reality of different resistance factions in Palestine conforms to Sharabi’s description in crucial ways. In the West Bank today, membership in Fatah protects a person from harassment by the security establishment and often helps him or her get a job. Conversely, belonging to another faction may seriously harm a person’s job prospects and put his or her personal security at risk. As the example of Muhammad Dahlan and his clients shows, when cut off from the organization, a person is lost (or “sent to hell”, in Jibril Rajoub’s blunt formulation).

Second, the authoritarian style of government and the marginalization of women and the young corresponds with another key feature of neopatriarchy, namely paternalism. According to Sharabi’s description of neopatriarchal society, paternalism organizes society at all levels. The family is dominated by the father figure, and relations are strictly vertical. This system of unilateral respect (instead of mutual respect), based on fear and submission, is taken over into the social and political realm. There is no true social contract in such a system: “Crime is not distinguished from sacrilege or rebellion; and punishment is intended not to reform but to restore the sanctity of the law and to safeguard existing social relations.”

The harsh treatment of those who criticize the PA/Fatah leadership and the disregard for the oppression of women that can be witnessed in the West Bank today are symptoms of paternalism, as is the figure of Mahmoud Abbas, who is (unelected) President of the Palestinian National Authority, head of the PLO, and leader of Fatah all at the same time.

Third, Sharabi describes two Arab elite positions towards the colonizers: nationalist/anti-colonial and conservative. Both functioned according to a patriarchal logic where personalized relations of authority were what mattered. The main difference between them was that the conservatives were willing to collaborate with the colonizers based on their own interests, which they tended to equate with that of the nation. The colonial regimes, including the Zionist, employed a divide-and-rule strategy, with traditional leaders being the instrument. Measured along Sharabi’s criteria, the Fatah leadership can be characterized as a conservative upholder

---

28 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, 35.
29 Ibid., 40–43.
30 Ibid., 47.
31 Ibid., 62.
of neopatriarchy in Palestinian society. The top echelons of Fatah have a vested interest in continuing to cooperate with the occupier, as this cooperation is encouraged by the international community and therefore secures US and EU support to the Ramallah-based PNA/Fatah leadership. Being dependent on support from the international donor community, the West Bank leadership is ready to risk losing their legitimacy among ordinary Palestinians if that is what it takes to uphold their legitimacy in the eyes of Israel, the US and the EU. Pitted against them are the nationalists of both secular (PFLP) and Islamist (Hamas) persuasions, but these factions also operate according to a patriarchal logic.

Particularly interesting is Sharabi’s observation that neopatriarchy’s “most pervasive characteristic is a kind of generalized, persistent, and seemingly insurmountable impotence.” Such impotence is prominently on display in the PNA’s inability to impose even the most basic conditions on Israel, such as a freeze in settlement building, before negotiations continue. It is also apparent in the division between Fatah and Hamas, which makes any serious progress in peace talks impossible.

As Sharabi writes, liberation is not a fix for the problem of neopatriarchy, as can be seen in most of the Arab states today; it will not remedy that “seemingly insurmountable impotence” that is the result of the neopatriarchal political culture. The Fatah leadership have not achieved more than gaining a parastate that is not sovereign at all, and even if it did succeed in throwing off the yoke of Israeli occupation, the state it is in the process of making is a weak one, built less on institutions than personalized power and brutal coercion.

Reactions from the grassroots

Where does this state of affairs leave the Palestinian grassroots, and in particular, young Fatah and other activists? Three answers from young people can be witnessed in Palestine today. The first, on which I will use little space, is political exit among young people, who constitute a tremendous political capital that is now wasted. According to 2013 statistics from the Palestinian central bureau of statistics, 39.9% of the 4.5 million-strong population are below the age of 15, and the median age is 19.3 years. Many of them are thoroughly disillusioned with Palestinian politics and opt out. As a former Fatah student senate speaker at a Bethlehem university told me:

Even I, as deputy speaker of the student senate, I want to continue in a social vein rather than a political one, helping with capacity-building and such. Everyone is alienated from politics to some degree.

32 Ibid., 7.
35 Interview in Bethlehem, 4 February 2013.
**Renewed non-violent activism**

The second reaction is a strategic shift among young Fatah and other activists away from the leadership’s focus on bilateral negotiations towards rights-based, nonviolent activism. In addition to the anti-normalization activism mentioned above, I will focus on two initiatives here, both of which may be considered responses to the failure of the PNA and Fatah leadership’s strategy: The “settlements” or resistance villages put up by activists in 2013-2014, and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

The resistance villages are a kind of Palestinian “settlement” on Palestinian land occupied by Israel. Activists arrive in an area of the West Bank controlled by Israel and set up a tent camp and then start renovating the area and building simple infrastructure – paths, latrines, sheds, etc. They also set up a village council, and assert their right to do this because the land is recognized to be Palestinian according to international law and UN resolutions. These villages are a way of asserting ownership of the land. The first one was called Bab al-Shams, the Gate of the Sun, and was established in an area that is slated for extensive illegal Israeli settlement building. The initiative was highly mediatized and was very popular with Palestinians, since it meant taking the initiative away from the Israeli state and turning the practice of settlements against them.36

Bab al-Shams in turn inspired four similar initiatives across the West Bank, including Ein Hijleh village outside Jericho in January-February 2014, where the activists managed to stay on the land for one week before they were forcibly evicted by the Israeli military. In all of these initiatives, political and ideological differences were put aside in order to concentrate on the common enemy.

Several young Fatah activists participated in the planning and execution of both Bab al-Shams and Ein Hijleh. Important features of these villages are that they invite unity within political pluralism and that they are thoroughly grassroots. The Fatah leadership did not know about Bab al-Shams, the first village, before it happened, despite the fact that some of the key organizers are local Fatah activists.

One of the organizers of Bab al-Shams told me:

> On the political level, there was real political unity on the ground. Participants came from all the political factions. So it is an invitation to the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and Gaza that they think seriously about the need to unite, and to what extent the people are actually able to unite on the ground.37

Making the same point, Diana al-Zeer, spokesperson of Ein Hijleh village, dismissed what she called the top-level “internal Fatah nonsense” – a reference to bickering and conflict among Fatah leaders.38 She contrasted it with the many Fatah youth and local Jericho-based Fatah members who participated in Ein Hijleh.

---

36 For details of this event, see Jacob Høigilt, *Why Is There No Third Intifada? An Analysis of Youth Activism in the West Bank*, New Middle East Reports (Oslo: Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, 2013).

37 Interview with Khalid, leader of a community center in Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, 32 January 2013.

38 Skype interview, 5 march 2014.
Bab al-Shams and Ein Hijleh made explicit a connection with other kinds of popular activism. The press release for Bab al-Shams was published by the Popular Struggle Coordination Committee.\textsuperscript{39} This is a loose organization that gathers activists from the various West Bank villages, and has staged weekly, non-violent demonstrations against the building of the separation barrier since 2003. It is a distinctively grassroots movement, although its popularity has induced many among the PA and Fatah elite to appear for a short while at the scene, getting interviewed by the media, before the Israeli military starts firing tear gas grenades at the protesters. The fact that the press release was published by the Committee indicates personal and organizational integration on the grassroots level.

The press release distributed by the activists of Ein Hijleh also features an interesting paragraph:

> Based on our support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) we call upon our friends and international solidarity groups to stand with the demands of the Palestinian people and boycott all Israeli companies including Israeli factories and companies that work in the Jordan Valley and profit from Palestinian natural resources.\textsuperscript{40}

The BDS campaign, which calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights was initiated in 2005 and has gained recognition as a significant evolution of the Palestinian struggle.\textsuperscript{41} \textsuperscript{42} The campaign unites Palestinians in the occupied territories, Israel and the diaspora, and it also involves an international community of solidarity activists.

The campaign's manifesto, issued in 2005, represents a break with official Palestinian strategy. It invokes rights and international law instead of bilateral negotiations as a way of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it does not take a stand on the one-state or two-state question, and it emphasizes the plight of all refugees instead of focusing on the West Bank and Gaza, as the Oslo process framework did:

> These non-violent punitive measures [boycott, divestment and sanctions] should be maintained until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{42} Its website is found at http://www.bdsmovement.net/.

\textsuperscript{43} http://www.bdsmovement.net/call
The BDS steering committee is composed of 27 Palestinian NGOs, representing the whole political spectrum, and it has succeeded in coordinating international awareness-raising campaigns. The last example of the latter was the 2012 Global Day of Action, which included actions in 23 countries, the majority of them European. The BDS campaign has been so successful that both the Israeli prime minister and the US secretary of state have been forced to recognize it as a counterforce to their own policies. The BDS national committee makes a point of including all the political factions among Palestinians, and has become an important node in the network of grassroots resistance initiatives, not only within the occupied territories, but across the geographic divides that separate Palestinians. As one activist-scholar states, the BDS campaign has “to some extent opened up a space for Palestinians – and particularly Palestinian youth – to restart the process of reclaiming their national movement by organizing Palestinians across national boundaries.”

The BDS campaign is perhaps the most obvious example of how these grassroots activists have been able to bypass or pacify the Palestinian elite, by linking different social and political sites together in a common initiative. Not prone to accept dissent on either internal or external issues, the Fatah-dominated PNA and its security apparatus have been quick to stifle activism they view as a challenge to their authority, regardless of whether that activism is directed at Israel or at the Palestinian leadership. BDS coordinator Omar Barghouti explained that the campaign has managed to avoid repression by making all the political forces, including Fatah, part of the BDS National Council, not as individual members, but as members of a joint committee that constitutes the biggest partner in the BDS National Council (BNC). All the factions are able to agree on the principle of BDS, and so they could agree to come together in such a cross-factional committee. Thus Fatah is indirectly part of the BNC, but neither it nor the PNA can be held responsible by Israel for the discourse and actions of the BNC. This is one reason the BNC escapes PNA repression. Another is the fact that the BNC represents nearly all the Palestinian political forces. This function gives the BDS campaign an unusual degree of freedom and political leverage in relation to Fatah and the PNA:

[W]e can have our cake and eat it, too. We have legitimacy based on the membership of all the political parties, but none of them interferes. None of them sits at the table as a party. (...) We have nothing close to democracy, nothing to stop the PA from trying to crush us. But they know you can’t crush such a huge coalition without alienating the entire society. So if you check the Arabic media you will not find one single attack on the BDS movement by any Palestinian official. They are too scared. We criticize them, but they do not attack us. That’s leverage.

Thus, in the fall of 2013, the BNC was able to publish a strongly worded condemnation of President Mahmoud Abbas’s policy of normalization under occupation, without getting punished for its boldness.

---

44 The BDS campaign’s own description of Global Day of Action is found at http://www bdsmovement.net/activecamps/bds-global-day-of-action-2012.


46 Interview with the author, Ramallah, 6 November 2013.
A common trait of the BDS campaign and the establishment of Palestinian “settlements” on Palestinian land is that they focus their activism on specific issues or aims on which everybody can agree, including the PNA and the top echelons of Fatah. Nobody can criticize non-violent attempts to retake occupied land in the West Bank or to boycott Israel, without losing whatever political credibility and legitimacy they might have. At the same time, these initiatives are by their very existence an implicit criticism of the Palestinian leadership, because this leadership consistently fails to engage or develop similar popular tactics, clinging instead to a strategy of negotiations and state-building that most Palestinians do not believe in.

The Youth Against Settlements campaign in the southern West Bank city of Hebron is a particularly potent illustration of this point. Its foremost aim is to pressure Israel to reopen a central market street in downtown Hebron which it closed for Palestinians in order to facilitate the transport in and out of the city of some 400 Israeli settlers who have taken up residence in the middle of the old city. Isa Amr, the campaign’s coordinator, works independently of the factions and was scornful of the Palestinian elite’s contribution to Palestinian resistance: “Neither Hamas nor the PLO factions wish to relate to us, but when we organize a demonstration, thousands turn up here in Hebron. When they do the same, only some handfuls of people come, many of whom are Israelis.” He reported widespread antipathy to the PA and massive support for grassroots initiatives like his own among the city’s inhabitants.47

Lori Allen has recently described how the politics of pretending in Palestine – pretending that there is a state that respects human rights, pretending that there is a meaningful political process going on – leads to widespread cynicism.48 She writes that this cynicism “also has a (more) constructive side. Cynicism is “a critical stance,” part of what makes Palestinians see a “horizon, however vague, of alternative possibilities and hopes.”49 I would argue that these grassroots activists I have been talking about have not only seen this horizon but are actively trying to get there. And they inspire others, as is clear from the positive media coverage they have got, the large number of people who openly sympathize with them, and from my interviews with youth, activist and non-activists, in 2013.

This was clearly shown in a remarkable demonstration in the West Bank during the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014. Without assistance from any of the political factions, young protest organizers (several of them from Fatah) managed to gather at least 10,000 people, including children and the elderly, for a peaceful march against the Qalandiya checkpoint near Ramallah to protest against the occupation.50 It was the first time in many years so many people turned out for a demonstration.

At the same time, the event showed the difficulties faced by young activists. They desperately appealed to leaders of the various political factions to adopt the initiative and secure that the

---

47 Interview with the author, Hebron, 19 March 2013.
48 Allen, The Rise and Fall of Human Rights Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine.
49 Ibid., 189.
momentum was being upheld, but they all refused to do so. In general, the Fatah/PNA elite have not really responded to the criticism and disillusion they face from society and grassroots Fatah members, and despite the energy of the grassroots activists who challenge them there are clear limits to what can be achieved without support from above. Isa Amr of the Youth Against Settlements in Hebron, who has been able to gather thousands of people to protest against the occupation, was quite clear that he felt he had no influence on Palestinian politics whatsoever. To be able to mobilize massively, these grassroots activists are dependent on support from above, and that support is not forthcoming. On the contrary, there is a deep-seated belief among the youth that the elite appropriate any 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.

Uncoordinated and violent outbursts of anger

In an earlier report, I wrote that the Palestinian leadership's unwillingness to engage in and take responsibility for such grassroots resistance might lead to spontaneous and destructive outbursts of anger rather than well-planned popular resistance against Israeli occupation and colonization of the West Bank.

Events during 2014 unfortunately support this rather pessimistic conclusion, and constitute the third kind of reaction by Palestinian youth to the neopatriarchal policies of the Fatah/PNA elite. During the latter half of that year, young Palestinians in the West Bank rioted in response to their hopeless and humiliating situation, and some individuals also murdered Israeli civilians, prompting Israel to collectively punish Palestinians across the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

The event that introduced this report – the abduction and killing of three teenaged Israelis in the West Bank – set off a vicious cycle of events. In the West Bank itself, the Israeli military conducted mass arrests and searches also in so-called A areas, contravening the security coordination agreement that leaves these areas under full Palestinian control. On 21 June, Israeli troops parked their jeeps right in front of Ramallah's central police station and searched the area while the Palestinian officers inside stood by the windows and watched them passively. This was too much to bear for young Palestinians, who attacked the police station directly after the Israeli troops had left, pelting it with stones and vandalizing a police car parked outside. Eventually, the Palestinian police officers started to shoot at the rioters. The incident was a potent reminder of the asymmetry in the security coordination, the anger it arouses among the populace, and the destructive consequences this aspect of normalization

---

51 Personal communication with Dr. Ahmad Jamil ‘Azim, lecturer at Bir Zeit University, who was himself approached by the organizers of the demonstration, Ankara, 23 August 2014.
52 Interview with the author, Hebron, 19 March 2013.
53 Interview with activists Suhad and Yusuf, Hebron, 19 March 2013.
54 Høigilt, Why Is There No Third Intifada? An Analysis of Youth Activism in the West Bank.
has among Palestinians. Other examples of uncoordinated and self-defeating forms of political activism in the West Bank abound – a random look at one of the main Palestinian news web sites, Ma'an, gives two: shootings at settlers’ cars near Hebron, and the arrest by Israeli forces of an alleged terror cell originating from Jenin, who apparently planned to attack Israelis with a Kalashnikov, an M-16 and a couple of other handguns.

The incidents recounted above are not isolated instances of rioting and violence. Palestinian youth in the West Bank have rioted against the policies of the PNA before, and spontaneous stone-throwing against Israeli forces in refugee camps and near checkpoints happens all the time. The common denominator is that these reactions are for a large part unorganized, uncoordinated and chaotic. Some of the participants are just children, and older Fatah activists I spoke with in 2013 deplore these activities because they only lead to arrests, and in some instances even the serious injuring or killing of teenagers (as happened in Aida refugee camp in 2013, when 13-year-old Muhammad al-Kurdi was seriously wounded by live Israeli fire).

In addition, they pose a security risk for more organized resistance, since children who are arrested by the Israeli military are easy prey for intelligence officers who want to stop organized resistance.

**Conclusion**

The policies of the Fatah/PNA elite examined here conform to a political culture of neopatriarchy, which is a serious deficiency in the Palestinian struggle for liberation from occupation. The cultivation of factionalism, the authoritarian bent, the marginalization of women and the young, and the accommodating stance towards Israel and the United States alienate large segments of young people, including Fatah activists. The result is political exit among many, fragmentation of the resistance struggle, periodic and uncoordinated outbursts of anger, and – for a few – the resort to violence and terrorism in largely isolated incidents.

The Palestinian elite’s political culture is of course not the only cause of the political malaise in the West Bank. Israel’s systematic and brutal oppression of the Palestinians, the progressive colonization of Palestinian land, and the international community’s unwillingness to take bold steps to end the occupation are all important parts of the picture. This report has focused on the intra-Palestinian aspect because it is often overlooked to the benefit of a high politics perspective, and because the political culture of the Palestinian elite will continue to pose a large problem even in the unlikely event of some sort of Palestinian liberation or self-determination.

---

55 Repercussions of this event were more serious in East Jerusalem, where a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy was burned alive as revenge. The situation of Palestinian Jerusalemites is however quite special and will be dealt with in the next report for this project.


Change in the political culture has to come from within. There are, however, some steps outside actors such as Norway may take to limit the negative effects of the current Fatah/PNA policies and encourage positive change:

- Put pressure on Hamas and Fatah to reconcile in a meaningful way that entails real cooperation and coordination between them;
- Channel more of the aid away from capacity-building workshops and the like, and direct it instead to grassroots community centers, especially in West Bank refugee camps, as they are the frontline in the struggle against social fragmentation and political chaos;
- Press the Palestinian political elite to revive the PLO as a representative organization for all Palestinians by holding new elections to the Palestinian National Council;
- Support the well-organized initiatives that have sprung up as a reaction to the political lethargy on the elite level, first and foremost by engaging with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee (BNC), which is a democratic, pluralist and representative Palestinian political body committed to non-violent resistance against occupation.

The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.