The Clash of Generations in Palestine

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 constellation, 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.

How the Fatah elite and the PNA alienates young people

First, the Palestinian National Authority has been characterized as becoming increasingly authoritarian under Abbas, not least as a result of the security sector reform. The Fatah leadership has, by associating itself so closely with the PNA as to blur the boundaries between them, turned from leading the resistance to governing in a repressive manner.

This in turn has led to a divide in the Fatah organization that today is torn between a ruling elite, which is first and foremost concerned with preserving the system, and a big body of members who still regard themselves as belonging to a liberation organization. This divide is felt acutely by young grassroots activists. Even in the youth organization of Fatah, student activists outside the Ramallah headquarters experience a great distance between them and their leadership. Within Fatah, relations are strictly vertical, and young activists are not encouraged to take creative initiatives.

Second, there is the problem of factionalism. Factionalism is endemic to Palestinian internal politics, it is nurtured by the elite (not least apparent in the persecution of Hamas members in the West Bank), and it has a negative effect on young people’s will to engage politically, including in Fatah itself. 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."

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.

Third, the policy of security coordination with Israel has become a great liability for the PNA and the Fatah leadership, who are accused of cooperating with the enemy. Under this agreement, Palestinian security forces are to cooperate with Israeli ones to identify and arrest persons who might pose a security threat to Israel. Praised by the US and Israel, these forces are disliked by many Palestinians, as they are used against resistance activities that people regard as respectable nationalist endeavours, not least with the death of the peace process. 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, including among young Fatah activists.

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.¹ 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.

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. Here I focus on the growing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign.

The BDS campaign has gained recognition as a significant evolution of the Palestinian struggle. 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.

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. This gives the BDS campaign an unusual degree of freedom and political leverage in relation to Fatah and the PNA.

Events during 2014 potently illustrate the third, dangerous kind of reaction to the paternalist and exclusivist policies of the Fatah elite/PNA. 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 abduction and killing of three teenaged Israelis in the West Bank in May set off a vicious cycle of violent 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 22 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 security coordination, the anger it arouses among the young people, and the destructive consequences this aspect of normalization has among Palestinians.

That incident is not an isolated instance of rioting and violence. The common denominator for such reactions is that they are for a large part unorganized, uncoordinated and chaotic, often involving children. 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 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 outbreaks of anger, and – for a few – the resort to violence and terrorism in largely isolated incidents. The Palestinian elite 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. But 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.

Change in the political culture has to come from within. There are, however, some steps that 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 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.

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