Patriarchal Nationalists, Democratic Clans. Dynamics of Clan and Nation in Palestinian Politics

In March 2014, the Central Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the organization internationally recognized as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, had a meeting. During the meeting the PLO veteran Asad Abdul Rahman announced his resignation. “I have been in the PLO since it was established,” he said, “I am a member of PLO’s Executive Committee, the Central Council, the Palestinian National Council. I have passed 70 years of age, it is time for others to replace me.” Then it was heard from another member of the council: “But you are the youngest one among us.”

One year later there were elections for Knesset, the Israeli parliament. For the election the 1.5 million Israeli Palestinians or (Israeli Arabs) - those of Palestinian origin who did not become refugees in 1948 but remained in Israel, being Israeli citizens – united behind their 40 years old leader, Aiman Odeh. The party he led, the Joint List, became the third largest party in the Knesset. The average age of its 13 Knesset members was below the average of the Knesset as a whole.

On one side, old autocrats, on the other, young democrats. This situation represents a total reversal of historical political roles. After 1948, two completely different kinds of political culture evolved inside Israel and in Gaza. Inside, a clan based patriarchy – patriarchy referring to the dominance of old men over young males as well as women - came to dominate political representation. Conversely, in Gaza, a secular, anti-patriarchal national movement evolved – condemning the traditionalism and tribalism of the old generation.

Today, among the Israeli Palestinians, old men are out of local politics, although the clan factor still dominates it. Meanwhile, in the West Bank and Gaza the
Palestinian national movement is arch-patriarchal, not to say gerontocratic, ruled by old men. A main difference among the two cases is the regular exposure to democratic elections among Palestinians in Israel, and the absence of such regular elections in the occupied territories. As a result the clans (hamulas) have democratized while their patriarchal features have weakened. Conversely, the resistance movements have been de-democratized and, at least for the PLO, more patriarchalized. In the next sections, we compare the role of family and clan in local elections in Gaza and the Arab sector in Israel, finding significant differences.

Local Elections in Gaza

The 30,000 people living in the Bureij camp of Gaza is composed of 4,627 different households from as many as 718 different non-genealogically related patrilineages. One third of the households are, as shown below, households not related by kinship to any other households in the camp.

When local elections were held in the Bureij camp in 2005 family was not a factor in the voting pattern. There were 31 polling stations in the camp. Nowhere did the winning candidate (from Hamas) gain more than 61% of the votes, and nowhere less than 43%. The least popular candidate, from DFLP, nowhere gained more than 1% of the votes. All the candidates except one ran as representatives of factions. This independent candidate only gained 10% maximum, and minimum 0% in the polling stations of the camp. If clan/family had been a factor, the results would have varied more from polling station to polling station as internal coherent clans are congregated in the same neighbourhoods through principles of endogamy (marrying inside the kinship group) and patri locality (residing in the area of the father’s descent line). There were no hamula/extended family candidates, extended families did not vote uniformly, and family did not have an impact on the results in the camp, not in the local elections in 2005 and not in the elections for the PA in 2006.

Hamas being rooted in the camp while Fatah being split was also a factor determining the election outcome. The headquarters of Fatah disregarded local opinions and nominated candidates not...
Local Elections among Palestinians in Israel

The last decades have seen a transformation of political culture among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Already in 1996, the Israeli advisor to the prime minister on “Arab affairs” inside Israel, Ori Stendel, noted that while the influence of the *hamula* remained strong, the role of the elders had “reached its end” as a “youth revolution” was observed. Young, aspiring university-educated men (so far, few women), who want to pursue political careers, start in local politics—representing clan lists, not the parties that are widely perceived as dominated by patriarchal structures. As part of a clan, one could start a list and have the support of sub-clan members and ideological peers alike. The new generation remains loyal to their kinship group, while political processes inside the *hamulas* have been modernized and democratized. First and foremost, the nomination process has been professionalized. Internal primaries within the *hamulas* have become an institutionalized practice, with various degrees of formality; some having formal election committees to oversee that the primaries are conducted properly.

In 2013 elections were held in Deir al Asad, in northern Israel, a Muslim town of some 13,000 inhabitants. A clan candidate, Ahmed Dhabbah, defeated the candidate of the strongest party in the village, the communist party, Jabbah (the Front), in the election for mayor. Typical for local elections in the Arab sector was a youth candidate from a clan list, challenging both. The candidate, Bilal Sanallah Asadi, was a second nephew of the candidate for the communist party, and himself a former youth leader of Jabbah. He challenged his party as well as his clan, trying to get votes from both segments. “There is no internal democracy in the party”, he said in an interview with the author. “It is not for younger people like me. Take Deir Hanna, the same guy, Raja Khatib, has been he candidate of Jabbah since 1976!” Bilal did not create a revolution in the village, getting merely 242 votes (4%) in the election, mostly from the polling station of his own neighbourhood. “It was big”, Bilal said, realizing that he had lacked the money and personnel to do a comprehensive campaign.

After the elections the mayor from the clan (Ahmed Dhabbah) asked the leader of the communist party to be his deputy mayor. Thus the political elites in the village, former foes, were united. Moreover, they asked Bilal to be the lawyer of the council, which he accepted. No one thought he had acted disrespectfully by challenging his family and party. Rather, perhaps a token of the new political culture of the Israeli Palestinians, he was rewarded for his political guts.

The Importance of Democratic Practices

To conclude, if clanism represents one kind of political culture and the nationalist movement another, it is the latter that is patriarchal. While Fatah and the secular Palestinian nationalist movement in the occupied territories are run by and dominated by old men, the political culture founded in local *hamulaism* or...
clans of the Israeli Palestinians is no longer patriarchal. It is marked by a high participation rate that spills over to national politics.

When this is so, it is because the issue is not really about political content. They all share the same Palestinian national consciousness. It doesn’t have to do with clannism versus nationalist politics and ideology. It has to do with practice - democratic practice.

In terms of political institution building the main difference between politics organized inside and outside the 48 borders is that inside, since 1948 (locally since the 1960s) there have been regular democratic elections. A Palestinian born and raised in 1948 in Israel, would normally, from 1966 until today, have participated in local and national election 26 times. He or she would experience an election every second year. In Gaza, or the West Bank, one would have experienced elections 3 times. Every twentieth year, there would be an election.

While the clans have primaries, Fatah and the PLO lack internal democracy. The National Congress of Fatah is its supreme political authority. During the last 26 years it has had only one session. The PLO has never had an election. The Fatah and PLO’s leader, Mahmod Abbas, is 81 years old. The leader of PLOs parliament, the Palestinian National Council, Salim Zanoun, also from Fatah, is 82 years old.

An election is a part of a political education. To return to the local elections in Gaza, in the Bureij camp: When Fatah members went on strike, they actually succeeded. Fatah could not run the campaign without any locals running it, so they were forced to give in. They eventually lost, but the political contest forced them to renew themselves. Democratic political competition thus improves political organization. Where you have regular elections, nomination processes, campaigns, change of positions, every second year, you have a political system continuously revitalized, and you internalize democratic values and a democratic political culture. Where you have elections every 20th year, you don’t. That is the problem of the Palestinian national movement. They have never institutionalized democratic practices. The result is that while the clan oriented Palestinians inside are united and non-patriarchal, in the occupied territories the Palestinians are internally divided with a boiling, lost generation doomed to find outlet for political frustrations outside the formal political system.

**Recommendations**

- The Palestinian political system is in desperate need of political reforms. The PLO and Fatah have no excuses for not arranging internal elections. If such elections are held, this could pave the way also for new elections for the Palestinian Authority.

- The Israeli Palestinians are part of the Palestinian nation and are citizens of Israel. Yet they are largely absent from Israeli-Palestinian talks and the national Palestinian dialogue. Increased integration in Israeli-Palestinian affairs should be welcomed.