



[No Longer on the Sidelines? Youth and Politics](#)

Divided and yet United

The Palestinian Youth Faces a Contradictory Reality

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Palestinian youth is torn. Fragmented into the different Palestinian territories, young people live under various systems of government and can meet only in exceptional cases. They bear the trauma of previous generations within them and every day are subjected to the challenges of both an Israeli military occupation and repression by Palestinian regimes which are, at least partly, corrupt and authoritarian.

“For the first time, we were not divided into 2.5 million West Bankers, 2 million Gazans, 2 million Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, and half a million East-Jerusalemites, no! For the first time, we were simply Palestinians. 7 million Palestinians!”

Haneen, 34, from Ramallah

Many images circulated around the world during the last military clash between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip in May 2021. Most of them were of Hamas rockets being intercepted by Israel’s air defence system and of destruction in Israel and Gaza. But this escalation also gave rise to new images the likes of which had not been seen for a long time. They showed rebelling Palestinian youth that had organised – in demonstrations and protests and on social media. Hashtags such as #GazaUnderAttack and #SaveSheikhJarrah went viral and dictated the trends on Twitter for days.¹ Celebrities such as top models Gigi and Bella Hadid and pop star John Legend declared their solidarity with the Palestinian protesters.

Unlike demonstrations in previous years, young people did not exclusively protest local problems such as the blockade in Gaza, Israeli settlement construction and the associated dispossession on the West Bank, and the destruction of houses in East Jerusalem. Instead, the protests were marked by joint slogans such as “End the occupation”, “Save Sheikh Jarrah”, and “End the siege on Gaza”. In Ramallah, young people protested in solidarity with the Palestinian residents of Haifa, in Israel in solidarity with

the residents of Gaza, and in Gaza in solidarity with residents of East Jerusalem threatened with forced eviction.

Nor were most of the protests organised by specific groups or political parties, but often spontaneous, although Hamas did attempt to assume a leadership role in many places.² Nevertheless, Palestinians primarily took to the streets with a feeling of unity: Muslims and Christians, young and old, students, feminists, trade unionists, and people from across the political spectrum. For many, the overall impression was one of upheaval.

And indeed, many Palestinians, especially the Palestinian youth, see the recent protest movement, which has been clearly reflected in social media, to have been the beginning of a new era, of a better future. However, closer examination quickly reveals that, while the protesting youth is convinced that the situation cannot remain as it is, there is as yet no unifying vision to strive towards. Moreover, realising any possible common denominator for the protests, such as ending Israeli occupation of the West Bank and dissolving or at least reforming the Palestinian National Authority (PA), appears to be a pipe dream in light of the existing balance of power. A close look at the challenges, hopes, and realities of life for young people in the Palestinian territories thus reveals a multifaceted reality of contradictions.

Currently, there are some 5.2 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip,³ which means the population has almost doubled

in the last 25 years.⁴ The proportion of the population 29 or younger is 66 per cent⁵, and the average age is 20.8.⁶ While this age group is dominant, that reality is not reflected in the political and social power structures. Although those aged between 18 and 29 are increasingly visible in politics, as was the case in past protests, they have been unable to exert any influence on Palestinian politics to date. The ruling elite are more than 50 years older than the population average, and the average age of those on the Fatah Central Committee is 70. No member of the Palestinian leadership is younger than 35.⁷ The last national elections were held 15 years ago. Young society's claims to political participation have thus been rejected by the established elite.

"The internet is everything for us. We communicate, learn, work through the internet. During airstrikes, we are being warned, the solidarity of the international community helps us to endure. I literally don't know how we would survive without the internet."

Iyad, 24, from Gaza

Palestinian youth is part of the universal Generation Z, but combines that cohort's characteristics with its own realities and experiences. The generation was socialised after the creation of the Palestinian National Authority in the Oslo Accords and the subsequent Second Intifada, and its members' lives have been shaped by increasing Israeli occupation, intra-Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas, and growing PA authoritarianism. It has experienced extensive and constantly increasing Israeli control on the one hand, while living under a Palestinian self-rule whose institutions at least give the appearance of a system of government on the other. This parallelism leads to contradictory perceptions of the authorities among Palestinian youth, but in none of them do their needs and wishes play a significant role. In addition to the local experiences of the generation growing up in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, three locations that are extremely different from one another, there are three more regional

and global strands of development: the "Arab Spring", the new digital world with its capabilities, and the modern globalised discourse among young people.⁸

The "Arab Spring" revealed that resistance to those in authority, including parents, public dignitaries, and members of national leadership, is possible despite the hierarchical social system.⁹ The "Arab Spring" brought little mobilisation to the Palestinian territories and ultimately had no political impact there, yet its events, especially with respect to Egypt and confrontation with regional elites, made a lasting impression.¹⁰

Social media have become the gateway to the world for Palestinian youth.

Then there are the apparently limitless possibilities afforded by the digital world. Palestinian youth is now exposed to the attractions of Western consumer culture. For instance, online shopping has been established in the West Bank for several years, providing access to brands and goods that were unavailable there for a long time due to restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation. New Western-style cafes and restaurants have become popular meeting places. This makes life under the restrictions imposed by the occupiers more tolerable, reducing the urge to rebel. And for the Palestinian youth, social media have become their gateway to the world.

This is especially true of youth in the Gaza Strip, who, because of the blockade in place since 2007, have scarcely any opportunity to leave the coastal strip and interact with the outside world in person. Over the years, Hamas has cracked down hard on unorthodox opinions, intervened in school curricula, and implemented an Islamic fundamentalist moral code.¹¹ However, with the exception of pornography, Hamas scarcely censors the internet, which thus constitutes an unfamiliar sphere of freedom for those in Gaza.

Thus, intra-Palestinian discourse, which plays a central role in maintaining and reshaping the Palestinian national, cultural, and political identity, is only possible across borders and checkpoints with the help of social media. While young Palestinian people in Gaza are usually unable to visit Palestinians in the West Bank or Israel, social media facilitates intra-Palestinian discourse, professional and artistic cooperation, and even the formation of relationships and friendships, which counteracts alienation and fragmentation.

Above all, the internet allows Palestinian youth to participate in the modern discourse between

young people worldwide and become aware of their rights as humans, individuals, and citizens, concerns that at times eclipse even the question of national rights. The link between Palestinian human rights and other human rights movements around the globe became especially clear with the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement originated in June 2020 following the murder of George Floyd, a black American, by a white policeman – a movement which young Palestinians also joined. To this day, Floyd’s image can be seen on the Palestinian side of Israel’s dividing wall in Bethlehem, and in Ramallah, houses were decorated with posters featuring George Floyd with Eyad Hallaq



and Razan al-Najjar, two Palestinian victims of Israeli police and military violence.¹² For many young Palestinians, Floyd, Hallaq, and al-Najjar are all victims of violence on the part of a racist government that they believe can be combated only with the help of a global human rights movement.

“We didn’t expect much from the outcomes of the elections, but we were so excited to participate in a democratic process for the first time, to feel that we might have a voice that actually counts! Just imagine, I am a 27-year-old journalist and I have never voted in my life. But when the elections were cancelled, me and my friends completely lost faith. After this disappointment, I literally don’t know if anyone would register for future elections now at all.”

Jalaa, 27, from Nablus

The contradictions for Palestinian youth continue in the social and economic context. They strive for education, a career, and internationalisation, but are thwarted by unemployment, poverty, and travel restrictions. Increasing interaction through social media also provides the Palestinian youth with insights into and contact to other more liberal cultures that differ from the traditional conventions prevailing in many Palestinian families and everyday public life. It is therefore hardly surprising that many young Palestinian people suffer from a collective feeling of suffocation, difficulties in communicating with their parents, and a deep disaffection with political leadership.¹³ And the perception is not only that of an elite that has been in power for decades pursuing primarily private interests. The resulting distance leads to growing dissatisfaction with state institutions and political parties.

← Crossing borders: A portrait of George Floyd is seen on the Palestinian side of the Israeli separation wall in Bethlehem. Young Palestinians increasingly put their protest into an international context. Source: © [Mussa Qawasma, Reuters](#).

So far, it has not been possible to channel this dissatisfaction into new political movements and parties. Both the Fatah-led Palestinian National Authority and Hamas in the Gaza Strip prevent new parties from registering – neither entity ever established a law governing political parties.¹⁴ After national elections were announced at the beginning of 2021, some 30 electoral lists that were officially independent from the already existing parties were registered. But their campaigns would have been limited to only four weeks, organisational structures resembling parties must not be established. Surveys showed that these lists posed no threat to established parties (apart from schisms in Fatah), since few of them had much of a chance of overcoming the two-per cent threshold.¹⁵

Both the Palestinian National Authority and Hamas prevent new parties from registering.

The elections, which many young Palestinians saw as a new impetus for democratisation, were ultimately cancelled under the pretext that East Jerusalem’s voter turnout was not guaranteed. But it was obvious to the Palestinian youth in particular that the ruling Fatah, which was suffering from internal divisions, feared for its position of dominance in the West Bank in the face of a stable Hamas.¹⁶ Once again, hopes for even a bit of progress away from the Palestinian gerontocracy were dashed. New projects for liberalising the ruling elite or even conducting elections are scarcely credible in the wake of this fresh disappointment.

Political activity in the Palestinian territories is also fraught with danger. Critics of the system are increasingly being interrogated or detained by Palestinian security forces.¹⁷ Activism may also lead to problems with Israel, such as arrests or withdrawal of rights to leave the Palestinian territories or to enter Israel. The recent killing of political activist and system critic Nizar Banat

by Palestinian security forces demonstrated how high the price of freely expressing one's opinions can be. The violent suppression of subsequent protests by the Palestinian security apparatus in many West Bank cities also had an intimidating effect.¹⁸

These are all factors that deter many young Palestinians from making their voices heard politically. The limited prospects of success and great personal risks prompt many to pursue individual goals instead.

"If you are not the son or daughter of someone with influence, you will not be respected. And the politicians deciding about your life are three or four times older than you. There are the ruling people and there is us, the youth, no connection in between. This is our political system, a system of old men. It is frustrating to us."

Elias, 21, from East Jerusalem

Young Palestinians are thus interested in individual development and self-fulfilment, but restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation and the increasingly authoritarian Palestinian National Authority afford them few opportunities to pursue these goals. One reason for this is the patriarchal system, which is reflected in both politics and society as a whole: the elders have the power and use a strictly hierarchical system to reach decisions concerning the future. Young talent is largely left out. Fatah is especially wedded to the principle of seniority – with members acquiring one point for each year of membership, and the point total being used to qualify them for high-ranking positions. The Palestinian gerontocracy can thus be seen as a mirror of Fatah's internal organisational principles.

Participation in Hamas structures is tied to unconditional support for the organisation's Islamist ideology.



In the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, Hamas has held multiple internal elections since 2007, facilitating an internal party discussion but severely curtailing freedom of speech and the press for outsiders and meting out harsh punishment for critics.¹⁹ Participation in Hamas structures is tied to unconditional support for the organisation's Islamist ideology. Nevertheless, support for Hamas is growing, especially in times of war or escalation.²⁰ Many Palestinians – even those whose political, ideological, and even religious views are far removed from those of Hamas – often perceive this organisation to be the only power that can oppose Israel



Bleak prospects? Although Palestinian society's level of education is considered good in international comparison, a rigid educational system and poor chances on the labour market cause frustration among young people.

Source: © Mohammed Salem, Reuters.

in such times. Particularly during the May 2021 escalation, this assessment was coupled with the disappointment many felt towards President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian National Authority, including Fatah, which scarcely appeared during the protests that took place in all Palestinian cities.

However, patriarchal and hierarchical structures are not the only influences in Palestinian society. Ongoing political rifts between

the Gaza Strip and the West Bank owing to rivalry between Hamas and Fatah create deepened factionalism and even break up families. Nevertheless, some young Palestinian people are following the political example of their parents, since membership in one of the two parties at least theoretically gives them a chance to get a job and to be heard. On the other hand, young Palestinians are continuously labelled based on their families' perceived political orientation, even though it may not be

their own. Factionalism and party affiliation give rise to ubiquitous expectations of a person's own camp. Since both Fatah and Hamas dominate the public sector in their respective entities and are thus the primary employers, corruption is endemic.²¹ Those who want to get ahead must find a party patron. Most young Palestinians believe this to be harmful, but are nevertheless frequently, even if involuntarily, pressurised into such dependencies through the education or labour market.

"I studied sports, I was a handball player for the national team. But now I work as a day labourer in Israel. Every day in the morning, I cross the barrier at a different spot. What shall I do? Over there, I earn three times more money than here and I need the money to start a family. I have no choice."

Yazan, 29, from Tulkarem

Economic prospects are also gloomy. Restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian National Authority's at times seemingly arbitrary bureaucracy make a flourishing economy or the development of new entrepreneurial ideas virtually impossible. As a result, many young Palestinians are primarily focused on developing the capacity for earning a living – so political involvement is not a top priority.

Phenomena such as criminality, suicide, prostitution, and drug addiction are increasing.

Palestinian society's level of education is considered good in international comparison, but there is still a great deal of frustration in this area. The percentage of university graduates in the Palestinian territories varies by region from 14 per cent (Hebron) to 23.4 per cent (Ramallah).²² Still, an unemployment rate of 53 per cent (and as much as 72 per cent in the Gaza Strip) often leads to a severe personal crisis

triggered by disappointed expectations of life after university and the reality of unemployment.²³ Phenomena such as criminality, suicide, prostitution, drug addiction, divorce, emigration (where possible), and difficulties starting families are therefore increasing among highly educated individuals.²⁴

In addition to the high percentage of academics, there is also a high percentage of dropouts: 25 per cent of 15-year-olds have dropped out of school.²⁵ The primary reasons for this are the insufficiently stimulating educational environment resulting from a rigid educational system, a shortage of schools that leads to packed classrooms, and interruptions of school attendance due to arrests (primarily affecting young men). Poor economic conditions prompt many children to leave school to feed their families or seek independence from them. Young women often prefer the option of marrying young in order to relieve financial strain on their families. The poor prospects of getting a job suitable for a university graduate lead many young people to wonder why they should waste their time and money if the unqualified or illegal Israeli labour market promises higher wages than qualified work in the West Bank.²⁶ For instance, it has now been well documented that, particularly in Palestinian cities near the Israeli barrier, young Palestinians slip through holes in the barrier onto Israeli territory where they work as cheap, unauthorised labour in such jobs as gastronomy or construction.

"The youth in Jerusalem has no one who speaks or advocates for them. But in the recent months, they were able to voice themselves. They found ways to stand up for their rights and to spell out that East Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine."

Rami, 43, from East Jerusalem

East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel, received special international attention during the last war. It was not just that Hamas in the Gaza Strip used violent clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli army at the Al-Aqsa Mosque as an

excuse to fire rockets into Israeli territory. Even after the cease-fire, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, national and religious symbols for Palestinians and for Muslims worldwide, repeatedly became the focus of protests and clashes. These clashes were often provoked by extreme right-wing settler organisations planning marches through Muslim areas of the Old City of Jerusalem, sometimes supported and accompanied by sympathetic members of Israel's Knesset. Many Palestinian Israelis from other cities then travelled to Jerusalem to show support for East Jerusalem residents and defend Palestinian national interests at the Dome of the Rock.

This is a significant development in light of the fact that, over recent years, many young people in East Jerusalem have undergone a process of “normalisation”, of adapting to the lifestyle prescribed by Israeli politics and society. This is mainly due to the assumption that no independent Palestinian state would emerge, and that East Jerusalem, annexed as it was by Israel, would have no part even if it did.²⁷ Cut off from the Palestinian hinterland in the West Bank, without prospects for political union, and suffering pervasive discrimination in Israel's society and economic and legal systems without rights of codetermination²⁸, youth in East Jerusalem suffer from dangerous levels of disillusionment. Combined with factors such as unemployment, poverty, and aggression from Israeli settlers, this hopelessness among young people living in Jerusalem is prompting a growing number to view “heroic martyrdom” as desirable.²⁹

Palestinian youth in East Jerusalem are de facto left to their own devices.

East Jerusalem was annexed in 1980, and subsequent Israeli governments pursued an active policy of settling Israeli citizens there, including the destruction of houses, intensified settlement, and revocation of Palestinian identity

cards. Therefore, it cannot be expected that Israeli governments will address the plight of Palestinian youth in East Jerusalem or develop programmes for youth in the foreseeable future. For its part, the Palestinian government in annexed East Jerusalem has no power to act, so young Palestinians there are de facto left to their own devices.

It is all the more notable, then, that it was East Jerusalem and the political activities of the youth there that put Palestinian human rights back on the international agenda. The protesting residents of the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan enjoyed unprecedented prominence. Mona and Mohammad al-Kurd, twins faced with forced evictions, became new icons of the Palestinian youth movement and were hosted on almost all major international news programmes. The question of whether this wave of solidarity will actually bring about local political change over the long-term is what currently preoccupies many Palestinian activists in East Jerusalem.

“The last few months alone were very hard. It is difficult to stay hopeful and to feel like I could make a difference. Especially when so many elements are beyond your control. My friends and my peers are the ones who teach me every day that we as Palestinians have the power to use our voices. We will continue until we are heard.”

Ayat, 25, from Ramallah

The contradictory picture that emerges when examining the realities of life for Palestinian youth in the Palestinian territories shows why, thus far, many young Palestinians prefer the option of coming to terms with the system in which they live (Israeli military occupation, Palestinian National Authority rule, the Hamas regime) rather than rebelling against it. Despite the possibilities of the internet for establishing contact with the outside world and with each other and finding out about their own rights, geographical separation and differences in forms of government often prevent them from

engaging in major joint political activities. At the same time, young people often feel helpless in the face of the power, numbers, and occasional propensity to violence of the Israeli military, the Palestinian security forces, and Hamas, while also feeling abandoned by an international community that is unable to support them in the defence of their fundamental rights.

Despite this extremely gloomy situation, the Palestinian youth still manage to surprise us time and again with their drive, optimism, and creativity. Not only are Palestinians well-educated by global standards, but recent years have seen an increase in the number of new companies founded. Young Palestinians generate enthusiasm among young people the world over for the legitimacy of demands for human rights. For many young Palestinians, simply staying and refusing to emigrate is still considered the highest form of resistance, as reflected by the “Existence is resistance” slogan.

That this is true despite the difficult, unjust realities of life gives hope that the Palestinian youth have not yet relinquished the dream of a life of dignity. But it is also clear that given the Israeli policy of occupation, the continued gerontocracy of the Palestinian National Authority, and the repression of Hamas, the dream of a better future will not become a reality any time soon.

- translated from German -

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