Fatah from Below: The Clash of Generations in Palestine

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Fatah from Below: The Clash of Generations in Palestine

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ABSTRACT
Dominated by a Fatah/Palestinian National Authority coalition, West Bank politics is characterized by authoritarianism, factionalism and an accommodating policy vis-à-vis the Israeli occupier. These features are prominent parts of what Hisham Sharabi called neopatriarchy, a dysfunctional political system that leaves societies internally repressive and externally weak, marginalizing the young and accommodating colonial interests. The resulting alienation and dissatisfaction among young Palestinians have led to two kinds of reaction that bear on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict: a well-organized but leaderless popular resistance, and destructive, spontaneous outbursts of violence. The onus is on the elite to reform the political culture, as liberation from Israeli occupation will not by itself improve the dysfunctional organization of West Bank politics.

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 to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Saudi Arabia, in which he pledged to help Israel find the teenagers. He used the occasion to confirm his support for security coordination between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in Ramallah 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.

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? 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.’

The conflict over security cooperation with Israel is the most dramatic but not the only sign of a damaging divide between Fatah’s leadership and its grassroots activists. This divide is an important but understudied aspect of current Palestinian politics. Most of the recent literature on political contention in Palestine concentrates on the elite level, for example the conflict between Hamas and Fatah. However, the alienation and resentment against elite politics felt by many young Palestinians are an important factor shaping the political process. Of course, the main obstacles to Palestinian liberation lie elsewhere, namely in Israel’s occupation and ongoing colonization of Palestinian land and the international community’s inability to properly address this issue. However, the clash of generations in Palestine already affects the political process and is likely to have an impact on the development of a Palestinian polity even after an eventual liberation. It should therefore not be overlooked, so this article focuses on two specific questions: what are the reasons for the chasm between the elite and the grassroots, and what consequences does it have for the resistance struggle? I will answer these questions by focusing on three aspects of the current Palestinian National Authority regime: patriarchal and authoritarian governance, encouragement of factionalism, and accommodation with the occupying power. I argue that the combination of internal authoritarianism and impotency vis-à-vis the occupier is reminiscent of Hisham Sharabi’s notion of neopatriarchy, which was originally conceived as a way of theorizing about the stunted growth of the modern Arab states. Sharabi placed his hopes for the future in a progressive youth movement. The last part of this article examines two very different reactions among young people to the policies of the PNA and Fatah elite: highly organized, non-violent resistance on the one hand, and largely unorganized protests and acts of violence on the other.

The scope of the article is restricted to the West Bank situation and the policies of the Fatah/PNA elite. There is no reason to believe that Hamas has not alienated many Gazans by its form of governance over the last eight years, but as I have not had access to Gaza for this study, I have insufficient empirical material to include it here. The analysis is based primarily on interviews conducted with activists and observers in the West Bank from the autumn of 2011 to the autumn of 2013. Fieldwork of varying lengths (from one week to four months) was carried out at different intervals during this period. I stayed for short durations in Jerusalem, and in the West Bank village of Bayt Jala from late December 2012 to early May 2013. During these stays, I travelled around the West Bank meeting activists and ordinary university-aged youths, from Nablus in the north to Hebron in the south. Interviewees were selected based on snowball sampling. Starting with leaders of community centres in refugee camps and non-governmental organizations (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 33 tape-recorded interviews. Akram Atallah of the

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3 The comment was posted on Facebook on 20 June 2014. (Name withheld to protect anonymity.)

4 Where only the first name of an informant is given, the name has been altered to protect his/her anonymity.
Norwegian research institute 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 subjects who would otherwise have been hard for me 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 throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. News reports from independent Palestinian media and activist websites also form an important part of the source material. 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

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. Dominated by Fatah, parts of the Palestinian elite cooperated with the international community to create 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 became virtually indistinguishable from the top echelon of Fatah. In other words, the Fatah elite is the backbone of the PNA. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which is supposed to be the sole representative of all Palestinians, was relegated to the political sidelines and has since been largely irrelevant.

How does this PNA parastate rule? It quickly acquired several characteristics of the classic Arab authoritarian security state, thus replaying in the 1990s the scenario various Arab autocrats had made familiar from the 1950s onward. From the outset, power was concentrated in the executive, that is, Yassir Arafat. 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 had characterized Arafat’s style, the PNA under Abbas has proven no less authoritarian than under Arafat, particularly in the way the Palestinian security forces are employed against dissenters.

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1Needless to say, I never participated in acts of stone throwing.
Since the 2007 division between Fatah and Hamas, Abbas has ruled by decree, having no mandate from the Palestinian Legislative Council. Since then, there have been no national or local elections. There have also been no elections since 2006, apart from 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 is rather upheld by the use of force. The PNA relies heavily on its security forces, whose leaders are much despised among ordinary Palestinians for 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 a number of local branches are only tenuously connected to the central organization. Fatah today is torn between a ruling elite that is concerned first and foremost 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 exemplify 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, 11 out of 128 delegates are women—less than 10 per cent. 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, and the political leadership has not addressed this problem properly. Young Fatah women are certainly not happy about the situation. A Fatah activist in her late twenties 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.

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11Interview in Ramallah, 6 November 2013.
13Interview 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{14}

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 fifties and sixties, 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 nevertheless 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 from their leadership. By their own account, contact with the central leadership takes place only before elections to the student senate are held at the various universities, when they are provided with funding for student services in order to gain a majority of the votes. During the rest of the year they do precious little. They do not engage in popular resistance activities, as this would fall outside their mandate; this is restricted to providing services to the students, according to the Fatah representatives I spoke with.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, within Fatah, relations are strictly vertical and young activists are not encouraged to take creative initiatives.

\section*{Factionalism}

Factionalism in the sense I employ it here has to do with the relations between and competition among the many Palestinian resistance organizations, such as Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). It is a crucial element of Palestinian politics, and one that 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 most obvious and most relevant in the conflict between Fatah and Hamas. Hamas members and sympathizers in the West Bank face harassment and arrest 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 internal politics, and it has a negative effect on young people’s will to engage politically, including in Fatah itself. Young Palestinians feel that they cannot escape association


\textsuperscript{15}Interview with two Fatah student politicians, Bethlehem, 4 February 2013.
with one faction or another even if they try, because their family members’ history deter-
mines their own place in the political landscape. Factionalism stifles creativity, criticism and cooperation. This is true of young Fatah activists no less than of 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 encour-
egaged—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’.16

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.17

Membership in factions tends to combine with patriarchal family structures to impede youths’ 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.18

The antagonisms inherent in factionalism are replicated inside Fatah, where factionalist logic combines with clientelism to fragment and weaken the organization. A recent example of this is the well-known case of former Fatah Central Committee member Muhammad Dahlan. As the Fatah strongman in Gaza in the 1990s and early 2000s, Dahlan vigorously and brutally suppressed Hamas, on orders from Arafat (and later Abbas) and in line with factional logic.19 His subsequent conflict with President Mahmoud Abbas and Jibril Rajoub, also a Central Committee member and a long-term rival of Dahlan, ironically led to Dahlan’s expulsion from Fatah. However, he was not the only one punished: Fatah also purged 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, not the state apparatus of the Palestinian National Authority, can provide. Rajoub expressed the factionalist logic succinctly in an interview: ‘It was discussed in the [Fatah] Central Committee and we decided to send him to Hell’.20

**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 their Israeli counterparts to identify and arrest persons who might pose a security

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16Interview with Muhammad, Phoenix Center, Dhuhaysha refugee camp, 28 January 2013.
17Interview with Muna Barbar, al-Ram, 1 April 2013.
20Interview in Ramallah, 6 November 2013.
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 programme 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. Not only are they viewed as part of a ‘normalization’ (ta’tibi) with the occupier, they are also used against resistance activities that people regard as respectable nationalist endeavours.

Security coordination is arguably the most detested form of normalization, and the resistance against normalization is at present one of the cornerstones of popular Palestinian activism in the West Bank. 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 that sometimes succeed in putting a premature end to the meetings, as happened with a demonstration I witnessed outside the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem in 2013. 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.

In addition to normalization, 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 Palestine Papers. They showed the weakness of the Palestinian side and their willingness to make unheard of compromises, such as relinquishing 10 per cent 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.

The PNA, Fatah and Neopatriarchy

To sum up the preceding sections, the Fatah/PNA leadership contributes to a situation where they rule largely by coercion and personalized power instead of sound political processes and institutions; factional interests take precedence over the liberation struggle and even the rule of law; and in the security sector they accommodate rather than struggle against the occupying Israeli state. This elite operates within the framework of a modern parastate, the PNA, which was created as a result of the Oslo agreements and is dependent upon Western and Israeli policies for its existence.

To understand the degree to which this system is inimical to the aspirations of young people, how it alienates them and what their reactions are, it is useful to turn to Hisham

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Sharabi’s concept of neopatriarchy. Sharabi’s thesis about neopatriarchy was intended to explain the trajectory of the modern Arab states. Arguing that development in the Arab world was stunted in the social, political and economic domains, Sharabi sought to show that the pre-modern patriarchal structure of Arab societies had simply been revamped by the modern, post-colonial Arab regimes, 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. They continued to rule through coercion and personalized power, but this was hidden behind the veneer of institutionalized politics provided by modern parliamentary and governmental structures. One may agree or disagree with the way Sharabi draws lines back towards the pre-modern sultanates, but his observation that personal, family and factional ties trump the institutional façade is supported by the literature on clientelism and neopatrimonialism in the Arab world. In the Palestinian context, Amaney Jamal states that there were democratic elements in the PNA, but ‘because so much of the PNA was an extension of Arafat’s personal rule, democratic institutions in the West Bank remained weak’. This is no less true under Abbas’s presidency.

There is no real social contract in the neopatriarchal system. Obedience to the leader is an absolute requirement, and the boundaries between crime and criticism of the ruler are blurred. Paternalism, clientelism, family networks and coercion are what govern social relations in neopatriarchy, not the rule of law and institutions.

I recognize that this has become a contentious concept as a result of the epistemic disagreements among scholars who analyse the political process in the Arab world, since Sharabi’s line of argument may be construed as an essentialist one. However, I believe that the risk of sliding into an essentialist mode of thinking should not stop us from recognizing the importance of political culture as an analytic approach or employing an analytical framework that accurately pinpoints the sources of youth marginalization in the Arab world today. My use of it certainly does not imply a particular epistemic standpoint; I find it useful because it highlights prominent features of the social and political order in several contemporary Arab societies, among them Palestine.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the term neopatrimonialism, which is obviously related to neopatriarchy, has been used fruitfully to make sense of Palestinian politics. However, in the context of explaining the clash of generations I think neopatriarchy is a better analytic term. First, it was developed to understand a political culture rather than to address the more restricted question of political structure, and its approach is based on a class analysis and concrete power relations rather than on essentialist claims about Islamic or Arab exceptionalism. Second, Sharabi was particularly concerned with showing how the system hurt young people and women and explicitly put his hope in the young generation to challenge it. In a post-2011 Arab world where the youth bulge will continue for some


time to come, an analysis that highlights the generational divide seems pertinent, and this aspect is largely absent from the neopatrimonial framework, its attendance to paternalism notwithstanding.30

There is no neat fit between Sharabi’s theory and the current Palestinian political system. Apart from the sometimes tendentious generalizations Sharabi makes, notably concerning Islamic activism and the cultural impact of the Arabic language, his description of how the petty bourgeoisie in the Arab republics instituted neopatriarchy is not necessarily applicable to the Fatah elite’s appropriation of the Palestinian parastate after 1994. However, some of the central features of the neopatriarchal order are such pronounced aspects of today’s Fatah/PNA governance in the West Bank that the linkage is worth making.

First, factionalism, which I described above, is closely related to Sharabi’s description of kinship-based factionalism. 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.31

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, a predicament experienced by many young West Bankers with a current or previous affiliation with Hamas or the PFLP.32 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 parentalism. According to Sharabi’s description of neopatriarchal society, parentalism 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.33 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’.34 The harsh treatment of those who criticize the PNA/Fatah leadership and the disregard for the

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30It should also be noted that neopatrimonialism is also a contested analytic term. It is often used in a negative sense to describe the patron–client structure and ‘big man’ politics of Arab and to an even greater extent African politics. However, patrimonialism is really a type of authority, not a type of regime, and Weber described it as a legitimate kind of authority that was based on a contract of reciprocity between patron and client. In this sense, the concept is not necessarily a precise description of the political system in many Arab republics, where legitimacy and reciprocity have long since been discarded in favour of ‘the raw power of violence’; see Anne Pitcher, Mary H. Moran and Michael Johnston, ‘Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa’, *African Studies Review*, 52(1) (2009), p. 150; and also Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, ‘Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept’, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 45(1) (2007), pp. 95–119.

31Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 35.


34Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 47. [original emphasis]
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. The rule of law plays second fiddle to partisan interests, and as shown by Lori Allen, the massive spending on human rights education has proved to be little more than a fig leaf behind which the regime can continue its repressive policies.35

Third, Sharabi describes two Arab elite positions towards the colonizers: nationalist/anti-colonial and conservative. Both function according to a patriarchal logic where personalized relations of authority are what matters. The main difference between them is that the conservatives are willing to collaborate with the colonizers out of self-interest, which they tend to equate with the interests of the nation. The colonial regimes, including the Zionist, employed a divide-and-rule strategy, with traditional leaders being the instrument.36 Measured according to Sharabi’s criteria, the Fatah leadership can be characterized as a conservative upholder 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 for 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’.37 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 split between Fatah and Hamas, which makes any serious progress in peace talks impossible.

Reactions from the Grassroots

While the PNA and Fatah elite’s deference to the Israeli occupier leads to popular anger and resentment, the twin effect of authoritarianism and factionalism is political polarization and lower levels of interpersonal trust among the activists who oppose the regime’s policies. Amaney Jamal shows that under a non-democratic regime, a vibrant civil society like that in the West Bank may in fact bolster authoritarianism rather than leading to democratization, as would be the expected outcome in the literature on civil society and social capital. She finds that among civil society activists, support for the PNA correlates with a high level of interpersonal trust and a low level of support for democratic institutions, while those activists who are critical of the PNA exhibit significantly lower levels of interpersonal trust, but more support for democratic institutions.38 Her explanation for this is that the protection offered to those on the ‘inside’ of PNA’s authoritarian, clientelist system makes them trust more in their surroundings, while those outside these protective structures are left in the

36Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, p. 62.
37Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, p. 7.
38Jamal, Barriers to Democracy, pp. 83–84.
wilderness. Sharabi’s metaphor of the jungle, noted above, comes to mind. As Jamal notes, ‘[t]hese “democrats” remained isolated in their civic spheres, cognizant of the political realities that shaped their environment.’

Exodus from Politics

Where does this state of affairs leave the Palestinian grassroots, and in particular the young Fatah and other activists who are critical of the PNA and Fatah elite? Three reactions can be witnessed in Palestine today. The first, to which I will devote little space, is the exodus from politics of young people, who constitute a tremendous political capital that is now being wasted. According to 2013 figures from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 39.9 per cent of the population of 4.5 million is below the age of 15, and the median age is 19.3 years. Many young people 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.

It should be noted here that the Occupied Territories have historically had a high degree of youth participation in politics; this is connected to the importance of the Palestinian factions in resistance activism. However, disillusionment and ensuing alienation are palpable in recent surveys. A 2012 survey of 1851 young people in the Occupied Territories showed that 27 per cent of 15–29-year-olds belonged to a faction. Of those who did not belong to any faction, 10 per cent answered that they had left a faction recently as a result of the political division between Fatah and Hamas, while 39 per cent said they did not trust political parties. In a recent survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, respondents between 15 and 25 years old tended more than others to lay the blame for the PNA’s dysfunction on the PNA and Abbas or on Rami Hamdallah, the Abbas-supported head of the reconciliation government. Support for Fatah was also lowest among this age group (29 per cent), while complete alienation from all the factions was highest (34 per cent of this age group did not support any of the factions).

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 and towards rights-based, non-violent activism. In addition to the anti-normalization activism mentioned above, I will focus here on three

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39 Jamal, Barriers to Democracy, p. 88.
40 This issue is treated more in-depth in Christophersen, Heigilt and Tiltnes, ‘Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring’.
42 Interview in Bethlehem, 4 February 2013.
44 I would like to thank Khalil Shikaki at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research for generously giving me access to the raw data for the June 2015 poll, and Marianne Dahl at the Peace Research Institute Oslo for helping me process the data file. The PCPSR report based on the poll is found at http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/poll%2056%20fulltext%20English.pdf.
45 Non-violent resistance has a long tradition among Palestinians. For an overview, see Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment (Pluto Press, London, 2010).
initiatives, all 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 2013–14; the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement; and the Youth Against Settlements campaign in Hebron.

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, such as paths, latrines and sheds. 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, Bab al-Shams, the Gate of the Sun, was established in an area east of Jerusalem that is slated for extensive illegal Israeli settlement building. The initiative was widely covered in the media and very popular, since it meant taking the initiative away from the Israeli state and turning the practice of settlements against them.46

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 actions. 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 were 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 to think seriously about the need to unite, and about what extent the people are actually able to unite on the ground.47

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.48 She contrasted it with the many Fatah youth and local Jericho-based Fatah members who participated in Ein Hijleh.

The press release distributed by the activists of Ein Hijleh features a paragraph that connects it to another, prominent kind of grassroots activism:

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.49

46For 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).
47Interview with Khalid, leader of a community centre in Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, 31 January 2013.
48Skype interview, 5 March 2014.
The BDS campaign, which calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights, was initiated in 2005 and has gained recognition as a significant development in the Palestinian struggle.\textsuperscript{50} 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.\textsuperscript{51}

The BDS campaign has been so successful that both the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the US Department of State have been forced to recognize it as a counterforce to their own policies. 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’.\textsuperscript{52}

The third example of youthful grassroots activism is the Youth Against Settlements campaign in the southern West Bank city of Hebron. Its foremost aim is to pressure Israel to reopen a central market street in downtown Hebron which it closed to Palestinians in order to facilitate the transport in and out of the city of some 400 Israeli settlers who have illegally 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 PNA and massive support for grassroots initiatives like his own among the city’s inhabitants.\textsuperscript{53}

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.\textsuperscript{54} 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’.\textsuperscript{55} I would argue that the grassroots activists I have described above 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 received, from the large number of people who openly sympathize with them and from my interviews with youth, activists and non-activists in 2013.


\textsuperscript{51}See http://www.bdsmovement.net/call.


\textsuperscript{53}Interview with the author, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

\textsuperscript{54}Allen, The Rise and Fall of Human Rights.

\textsuperscript{55}Allen, The Rise and Fall of Human Rights, p. 189.
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.\textsuperscript{56} It was the first time in many years that so many people had turned out for a demonstration.

At the same time, the event showed the difficulties faced by young activists. Recognizing that they lacked the political clout to build a more sustained action from this initiative, they appealed to leaders of the various political factions to adopt it, but they all refused to do so.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, young people are deeply distrustful of the older generation:

They 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.\textsuperscript{58}

**Uncoordinated and Violent Outbursts of Anger**

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 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 incident that introduced this article—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 shooting at the rioters. The incident was a potent reminder of the asymmetry in the security coordination agreement, the anger it arouses among the populace, and the destructive consequences this aspect of normalization has among Palestinians.\textsuperscript{59} 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 websites, *Ma’an*, gives two: shootings at settlers’ cars near


\textsuperscript{57}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.

\textsuperscript{58}Interview with activists Suha and Yusuf, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

\textsuperscript{59}Repercussions of this event were more serious in East Jerusalem, where a 16-year-old Palestinian boy was abducted and burned to death as revenge.
Hebron, and the arrest by Israeli forces of an alleged terror cell originating from Jenin, whose members apparently planned to attack Israelis with a Kalashnikov, an M-16 and a couple of handguns.60

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 the most 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 the Aida refugee camp in 2013, when 13-year-old Muhammad al-Kurdi was seriously wounded by live Israeli fire).61 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.62

Conclusion

Under the governance of a Palestinian National Authority that has become virtually indistinguishable from the Fatah elite, 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. I have argued that the policies pursued by the Fatah elite/PNA correspond to a neopatriarchal political culture, as defined by Hisham Sharabi. This political culture is inherently inimical to young people’s desire to participate and contribute to the political process, notably in the struggle for liberation. Neopatriarchy thus alienates the young, including Fatah’s own members, from Palestinian politics, and the Palestinian struggle for liberation suffers as a result. Many young activists choose to opt out of politics. The resistance that does take place is fragmented along horizontal and vertical lines. For many, the only remaining avenue for political expression is represented in 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 article has focused on the intra-Palestinian aspect because it is often overlooked in favour of a high politics perspective, and because the political culture of the Palestinian elite will continue to pose a problem for social and political development in the event of a future Palestinian liberation or self-determination. Hisham Sharabi put his hope in ‘the new generation’ and its commitment to ‘legal, nonviolent terms of political exchange’.63 Young Palestinian activists in the West Bank have for years pursued this agenda; the onus is on the Palestinian political

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63Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, p. 152.
leadership to embrace the mode of activism current among West Bank youth activists and thus end both the clash of generations and the lack of unity that today characterizes the Palestinian liberation struggle.

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