

## **Changes in the Political Role of Palestinian Youth upon the Oslo Accords**

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The spiral of the Palestinian Intifada in 1987 contributed in reframing societal structures in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The launch of the Intifada from Gaza Strip refugee camps - that later on extended to include various occupied areas- has granted many youth groups in camps and cities a significant role, which enabled them to lead the resistance against the occupation, and disrupted the society's traditional structure.

The United National Leadership, despite some obstacles it encountered, has succeeded in creating a rebellious relationship between Palestinian citizens and the occupation, and circulated various statements, declarations and the constitution of the Intifada among citizens. There was also a new movement, represented in the declaration of strikes, economic boycotts, civil disobedience, refraining from paying taxes imposed by the occupation, as well as mass resignations from ministries; except for Health and Education. Moreover, domestic agriculture became an alternative for the occupation's goods and products and inter-factional relations between the factions and forces on the Palestinian arena were regulated, but characterized as being inconsistent, especially upon the establishment of Hamas Movement, which maintained minimal communication with the United National Leadership but refused to join it.

In addition, the Intifada has created a strong alliance among intellectuals and decision holders on the one hand, and the underprivileged, struggling class in camps and cities on the other hand, which granted it a national and collective significance by engaging all community components. While the poor groups in camps were always at the forefront of the confrontation, the intellectual and academic groups were conveying the aspirations of the Intifada to the world and to the

leadership in Tunisia. These groups also shed light on Gaza Strip, as it is the flame that instigated the Intifada before spreading out to the rest of the occupied lands. They also transformed the stereotypical image that Palestinians had previously developed towards camps; from a miserable place into a kingdom of resistance.

However, the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 had a profound social impact on the Palestinian society; it contributed in redistributing forces, and marginalizing the major role of youth. In fact, the emergence of an internationally accepted and legitimate authority that most of its leadership comes from exile and dominates the use of legitimate violence, has led to a significant decline in the role of youth, and to the establishment of new alliances based on money and power. In effect, as part of its efforts to achieve stability and dominate the economic sector, the authority worked to monopolize some of the economic pillars. Moreover, Most of Intifada youth activists in camps, villages, and neighborhoods became the authority's backbone in maintaining stability of the new social and political systems, as they were enrolled in security forces and were given the permission to use power against people who oppose the new systems. Hence, most of the Intifada leaders became obedient to the new systems, except for some who have found their way into decision making levels. This has led to the deterioration of the roles of universities, work unions, and other facilities which were previously a source for formulating ideas, guiding public opinion, leading confrontation, as well as inspiring intellectuals and writers.

Moreover, the middle-class role in the decision making processes was greatly decreased for the interest of a capitalist stratum, which owns investments across borders and continents, versus the poor stratum that constituted the vast majority of the society. Consequently, this has led to the regression of the role of Fateh movement, as it was perceived as being affiliated to the authority.

Furthermore, the structure of Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip is compatible with that of the PLO in its perception toward the role of youth; however, their style of work differs. On the one hand, the PLO has monopolized the use of violence, and employed the symbolism of historical leadership, deep-rooted resistant heritage, individual representation, and national recognition to control the youth of the First Intifada. While, on the other hand, Hamas has monopolized the religious spectrum and has worked on implementing a pattern of religious ideologies to serve its political interests in society. Hamas employed the religious discourse to influence citizens; it established a network of charities and sports clubs that attracted thousands of children, who soon formed the 'striking power' of Hamas in the Gaza Strip later on. It also launched women's seminars and media institutions at home and abroad.

Moreover, Hamas derived its power from the fact that it's a succession of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, and exploited the faults of the National Authority using its region-wide networks, particularly mosques, which were heavily used by the party to spread its agenda amid the absence of a real competition in this field, and the flexibility that were given to Hamas in this matter. Therefore, it had the opportunity to recruit a wide segment of youth in what serves its partisan interests through using religion to achieve its political ends and to recast events by projecting stories and fatwa<sup>1</sup> that are out of context to incite fragmentation and hostility that serves the interests of the party. This has enabled the movement to use the youth as a burning fuel, to maintain the division, and to keep its leadership advantages; as youth have been Hamas' backbone in strengthening and maintaining its control over the Gaza Strip in 2007 through their engagement in armed militia. Even though Hamas has provided a number of its youth leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Fatwa: a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.

roles, as members of the parliament or as its spokespersons, this does not exceed them being tactical moves to enhance the party's image in order to strengthen its control over youth.

The conflicting parties and representatives of national and religious factions are all aware that ending the division and uniting efforts against the occupation by adopting a resistance agenda will rearrange forces within the community, undermine the traditional structure that was developed after the Oslo Accords and the coup of Hamas movement in Gaza, and bring the youth back to the forefront. In addition, groups of intellectuals, writers, decision makers, and journalists will be granted a leading role in society, which is fiercely confronted by different dominating forces; not only the two main conflicting parties, but other forces that describe themselves as being progressive and democratic, while placing youth on the sidelines of their priorities and practical programs for years.

The perspectives and methodologies of the past cannot be culled to achieve conciliation. It is time for youth to participate effectively in the reconciliation process, as it is no longer possible to bypass the role of youth, who were the victims of split, and the sacrificing tools of the Intifada. Therefore, the great spirit of the First Intifada must be retrieved, by youth believing in the importance of their role and by leadership trusting in youth abilities to transform their roles from viewers and supporters to influencers and decision-makers, as they are guardians of the land and supporters of the cause, rather than factions and parties.