

The Role of Student Movement in Raising Political Awareness

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When reflecting on the impact of youth on economic, political, and social fields, their numbers and age group must be clearly identified. Recently, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics issued a population statistics report that states the following:

Region	population
West Bank	2,881,687
Gaza Strip	1,889,291
Total	4,780,978

According to the report, youth category was the highest among the age groups as follows:

Age Group	Population
0-17	2,097,475
18-29	1,066,320
Total	3,163,795

Youth accounted for 66% of the population, which represents the importance of their role in all fields. Moreover, university students constituted a high percentage among youth groups with 218,000 students currently registered in Palestinian universities, representing the active agents within towns, villages, refugee camps, and cities of Palestine.

Student Movements Abroad: Political Action

Student movements are considered the active forces within society; whether it's in Palestine or elsewhere in the Arab world or abroad.

Since its establishment, student movements have reinforced the Palestinian cause despite the Israeli occupation's attempts to weaken it. The Public Union of the Students of Palestine, which was the first official body of the Palestinian student movements, was established in 1959 in Egypt, and supported by Jamal Abed Al-Nasser and to some extent by Arab and international associations; it contributed to conveying the Palestinian struggle to fellow Arab countries.

Student movements practiced politics abroad, as the Union had a significant role in establishing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Additionally, student movements met with Arab and foreign presidents and royals, and established relations with parties, particularly in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Moreover, PLO and its embassies opened their doors to the Palestinian Student Union members, who later on became ambassadors and influencers in leading the organization or the Revolutionary Council.

The Union held annual meetings for its members from all over the world, which contributed in raising awareness and exchanging ideas and expertise. Furthermore, some countries allowed Union members to attend parliament sessions, which promoted political practice and awareness. Overall, this established a rich environment that nurtured the Union members' diplomatic and political knowledge, and enabled them of assuming a political role to represent the PLO in Arab and foreign countries.

In addition to its political role, the Union had also practiced some cultural activity as it paid special attention for Palestinian and Arab poets, novelists, and intellectuals through hosting their symposiums and lectures. For instance, Mahmoud Darwish's symposium was held in Damascus National Football Stadium.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Institute for Palestinian Studies in Beirut in 1963 has largely contributed in raising the public awareness on the Palestinian cause, as it shed light on the evolution of the Arabic-Zionist conflict, acquainted international and Arabic people to realities and dimensions of the cause. It also contributed to demonstrating the Arabic legitimacy in Palestine and highlighting its political, legal, and historical supporting pillars.

Student Movements within Palestinian Universities: National Practice

Student movements had survived several ups and downs, and witnessed many stages that can be divided into the following:

Stage one: from the emergence of universities - 1995

Stage two: 1996 - 2010

Stage three: 2010 – present

The general political context had affected the Palestinian Student Movements, since most of the Movements' leaders in universities were former prisoners in Israeli prisons. The role of Student Movements in Palestine focused on two main issues: the first one was to resist the Israeli occupation and instigate the Palestinian resistance, and the second mainly focused on supporting students through establishing a union that seeks to solve their problems, such as tuitions, registration...etc.

Phase One: Patriotic Education

Many students enrolled in Palestinian Universities upon their establishment; females represented 46% of approximately 24,000 students in the early 80s. However, Palestinian universities were established after revolutionary events that took place from 1937 and 1967 wars, to the 1976 Municipality elections. Consequently, student movements were established and it was notable that through this period, old-aged freed prisoners were the leaders of these movements, which enriched the movements with country-related matters, prisoner-exchange deals in 1982...etc.

During that period, most of the movements' leaders were administratively detained as part of the attempts seeking to weaken the student movements within universities. Moreover, in 1980, Israel issued a decision (854) to shutdown universities, claiming they are catalysts calling for action against occupation. However, this decision was combatted by student movements, unions, university administration and local community. Afterwards, the first Intifada launched, and was led by student movements; as the latter organized marches and events, where many students were arrested, martyred, or even exiled.

On the other hand, student movements conducted councils' elections in several universities, where competing student parties focused on winning instead of enhancing the political awareness of students.

Phase Two: Universities' Democracy

Student movements were divided between those who supported the Palestinian National Authority, and those who stood against it; the opposing movement often pressured the authority and its supporters to gain more sympathy and win elections. However, practicing the electoral process, participating in it, and coordinating its events have promoted the cultural role and

patriotic sense of students but did not enable them, however, from practicing political action. Therefore, leaders of student movements held leading roles in the Palestinian Authority; whether in the civil sector or in security forces, but did not assume any senior positions since they did not have any political skills or international relations. On the other hand, returnees with the National Authority held leading senior positions due to their qualifying experience in dealing with embassies, PLO institutions and international organizations.

With regards to the legislative elections in 1996, student movements' leaders - despite their qualifying skills- were not able to acquire any seat in the council, due to citizens' belief in returnees' abilities, and favoring tribalism.

Furthermore, movement's leaders were not assigned as ambassadors because most of them cannot speak foreign languages. In addition, the movement's leaders did not become members in the Palestinian National Council even though the organization's leaders are the movement's leaders abroad.

Since the arrival of the Palestinian National Authority in Palestine, it worked on improving education but did not on creating political awareness, diplomatic culture, or international relations.

Student movement in universities led the second Intifada despite of its transformation into armed resistance, which resulted in closing several Palestinian cities, killing and injuring civilians and prisoners, announcing strikes, marches and the vigils of solidarity. Moreover, students' dormitories, near the universities, were the headquarters of the revolutionaries and heroes. Many of the movement's students were martyred and arrested, while some of them are still behind occupation prison bars until this day.

However, the student's movement did not call for ending the split nor for handling its repercussions; instead, it deepened the intolerance and intellectual extremism.

Phase three: Absence of National Culture

This phase was marked by a weakened student movement, lower student services due to the closure of the political horizon and the difficult economic condition that Palestinians were suffering at that time, as well as regional and international changes such as the Arab Spring, the

absence of political and national awareness, and shifting the interest of youth towards football and entertainment programs as Arab Idol. Moreover, the student movement did not adopt or use any new tools and methods to develop the trade union work or the political and partisan roles; instead, it used the traditional, out of date work methods.

Technological developments have led to the establishment of scientific communities in universities aimed at conducting student activities that fill the services' gap provided to students by both student movements and student councils.

The student communities have held ceremonies, exhibitions, workshops, and symposia, have invited ambassadors and diplomatic missions to attend their events, and are working on exchanging training and research experiences with foreign students and universities. However, the student movement did not create a youth dialogue with any officials, ambassadors, or foreign student movements via video-conference.

Recommendations:

- Work on engaging university students in political and international conferences
- Exchange dialogue and experience among Palestinian university students, to enrich the student movement
- Separate partisan work from political work
- Meeting students with ambassadors, ministers, and diplomats
- Hold an annual youth conference to shed light on current issues and concerns
- Establish an institute to train and prepare young leaders
- Establish youth television shows with a political and national dimensions