

# NOREF Report

## Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring

**Mona Christophersen, Jacob Høigilt and Åge A. Tiltnes**

### Executive summary

This report investigates young Palestinians' views of their economic and political situation and their interest and level of engagement in politics with reference to two momentous political events in 2011: the Arab Spring and the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. A main question is whether the Occupied Palestinian Territories are experiencing a reinvigoration of youth activism.

The findings suggest that Palestinian youth have largely exited from politics, prioritising personal affairs (family and job) when considering the current situation and their future. They are unhappy with a difficult job situation, although West Bank youth express more optimism about the future than young people in the Gaza Strip. Corruption and political favouritism are experienced as a major problem on the personal level in both areas. The Palestinian Authority and Hamas governments are also criticised in regard to the state of democracy, freedom of expression and human rights, more so in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank. However, neither government is completely condemned, on account of their success in raising the level of security (the Gaza Strip) and economic prosperity (the West Bank).

Widespread discontent with their situation among the youth does not translate into increased political interest or engagement. Instead, the majority have abandoned organised politics and what they consider a political class associated mostly with

Fatah and Hamas and to which few seem to see any alternative. There are several reasons for this passive attitude. Firstly, since 1993, grassroots activism has been discouraged by the existence of a political elite that aspires to represent the resistance. Secondly, there is a widespread culture of fear in regard to political activity, so resourceful youth resort to less dangerous cultural and social activism, while the most critical voices choose political exit rather than confrontation with the authorities. A third reason is that international aid to the Palestinians effectively deflects energy away from political activism to the benefit of less contentious social and cultural initiatives. Fourthly, Palestinian youth do not seem to think that their situation is desperate enough to warrant any large-scale departure from the political routine and instead invoke the concept of *sumud* (resilience) or simply try to realise their full human potential as a silent form of resistance, leaving the political initiative in the hands of their leaders.

Thus, the Arab Spring has not led to Palestinian youth questioning fundamentally the performance of their leaders, while President Mahmoud Abbas's going to the UN has not inspired noticeable enthusiasm either. The existing youth groups, whether outside or inside established organisations, will have to work hard to engage their young compatriots. The governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip do not face an imminent explosion of youth anger – but neither do they inspire much enthusiasm among the young people they are dependent on to wage a successful liberation struggle.

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# 1. Introduction

Youth played a major role in the popular Arab revolts in the spring of 2011, not least in Tunisia and Egypt, where non-violent protest initiated by disillusioned young people brought down the regimes. The revolts in Tunisia and Egypt spread throughout the Arab world, which may be permanently transformed as a result of the ongoing popular unrest.

The problems that led to unrest in other Arab countries are also widely perceived to exist to a lesser or greater degree in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), such as limited economic and professional opportunities, lack of political influence, oppression by the authorities, and widespread corruption. However, matters are complicated because of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the fact that the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas have taken on the role of representatives of the populations of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively, to Israel and the international community.

Consequently, two developments or political events were perceived as landmarks in Palestinian politics in 2011. Firstly, the OPT have been affected by the Arab Spring, but this took the shape of a call for unity rather than the fall of the regimes in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Popular demonstrations in March 2011 called for an end to the political and geographic division between the two parts of Palestine. The youth were central to these demonstrations, and an embryonic social movement, the March 15th Movement, appeared on the political scene. Both Fatah and Hamas felt sufficiently pressed to take steps towards reconciliation, facilitated by a post-revolutionary Egyptian mediator. The reconciliation process has proceeded at a sluggish pace, with a possible breakthrough in negotiations occurring only in February 2012. In the meantime, President Mahmoud Abbas's bid at the United Nations (UN) in September 2011 for statehood sparked debate among Palestinians about the political and legal status of refugees, land rights, and the status of the Gaza Strip in the event of the unilateral establishment of a Palestinian state. The UN statehood bid significantly boosted the importance of the PA as a representative body for Palestinians.

In the light of these developments, what is young Palestinians' perception of their future and of their own role in the political developments in the OPT and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? In October-December 2011, Fafo carried out research in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to gauge the political attitudes and perceptions of the future among Palestinians aged 15-24 years. This age group comprises nearly 22% of the total population of the OPT,<sup>1</sup> and the extent to which its members are politically socialised and the attitudes they adopt will be important factors shaping Palestinian politics in the future.

We explored three dimensions of young people's social and political situation: (1) their personal priorities and ambitions for the near future; (2) their level of engagement with and interest in Palestinian politics; and (3) their perception of their role in Palestinian politics, including the influence of the Arab Spring in the OPT. The data was collected in the form of qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews (20 interviews in Bethlehem and Nablus, 10 in Gaza City) and a survey of 425 youths in the West Bank and Gaza Strip using a brief, standardised questionnaire.

When selecting candidates for the qualitative interviews, we aimed for maximum variation with regard to age and gender in the target group of youth aged 15-24.<sup>2</sup> We also ensured that there was variation in socio-economic background, political affiliation, educational level, and civil status as single, married or divorced. The fieldwork was implemented interactively in the sense that one researcher conducted and transcribed interviews in the OPT, which were shared daily with a colleague in Oslo, who provided instant feedback and advice. The qualitative interviews were mostly conducted in the respondents' homes or at the Fafo office in Bethlehem and at the researchers' hotels in Nablus and Gaza City. The interviews were conducted in English or Arabic with a translator. The quotes that appear in this report are not quotes in a strict sense as no tape recorder was used in the interviews, but

1 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *A Special Bulletin on the Palestinians on the Occasion of World Population Reaching 7 Billion*, October 2011, p 69, [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/\\_PCBS/Downloads/book1794.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_PCBS/Downloads/book1794.pdf).

2 Two of the interviewees in the qualitative part were 25 years old, but the survey and the rest of the interviews kept to the 15-24 years age range.

rather extracts from detailed notes taken during the interview. The qualitative fieldwork lasted from October 19th to November 5th 2011.

Two hundred youths aged 15-24 in the West Bank and 225 youths in the Gaza Strip were interviewed face to face using a standardised questionnaire. The objective was to supplement the qualitative interviews with the viewpoints and perceptions of a higher number of young people on a range of topics such as general satisfaction with life, livelihoods, media use and public participation, human rights, and the general political situation.

The Gaza Strip fieldwork was conducted just before and after Eid Al-Adha, on November 4th, 5th, 12th and 13th 2011. Later, we supplemented the original sample of 200 with 25 interviews carried out in the period December 30th 2011-January 4th 2012. The West Bank interviews took place on November 4th, 5th, 9th, 10th and 12th 2011. A majority of interviews took place in public spaces such as in a coffee shop, on a street bench or in a garden outside a school, but some were also conducted in private homes.

Resources were too scarce to carry out a comprehensive poll that would have resulted in statistics representative of all youth in the OPT. However, while this is a convenience sample of sorts, maximum efforts were made to select individuals from diverse backgrounds. The survey interviews took place in and around Bethlehem and Gaza City, respectively. As shown in Table 1, the interviews were distributed across four types of locations: refugee camps, poor or disadvantaged residential areas in the two cities, middle-class or affluent residential areas in the cities, and villages.<sup>3</sup> The allocation of respondents at the various types of locations was different in the two areas, with a comparatively heavier weighting on refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and a higher share of respondents from affluent and rural areas in the West Bank. To some extent, however, this reflects the different population composition in the two areas and the socio-economic situation on the ground.

We interviewed slightly more young men than women. With regard to the age distribution, we

deliberately interviewed relatively fewer youth aged 15 and 16 than those aged 17 and above. This decision was based on experiences from the qualitative interviews, which suggested that younger individuals were less preoccupied with political matters and had less interesting information to share overall, given the study objective. Nearly 9 in 10 respondents were single, while 12% were married, widowed or divorced. Over two-thirds of the respondents (70%) were students. About one-third (36%) were either employed (16%) or looking for work (20%).

**Table 1: Sample characteristic (N = 425)**

		West Bank	Gaza Strip	Both areas
Type of location	Refugee camp	33	82	115
	Disadvantaged urban area outside camp	25	52	77
	Middle-class/ wealthy urban area outside camp	78	49	127
	Village/ rural area	64	42	106
Gender	Male	101	126	227
	Female	99	99	198
Age	15	12	7	19
	16	17	12	29
	17	17	24	41
	18	26	22	48
	19	25	23	48
	20	25	20	45
	21	29	26	55
	22	18	32	50
	23	15	34	49
	24	16	25	41
Marital status	Single, never married	187	186	373
	Married	13	28	41
	Widowed	0	4	4
	Divorced	0	7	7
Enrolment at education institution	Student	148	151	299
	Not enrolled	52	74	126
Employment status	Employed	38	31	69
	Not employed, looking for work	50	37	87
	Not employed, not looking for work	107	157	264
	No information	5	0	5
Voting preference if election today	Fatah	63	144	207
	Hamas	12	47	59
	Other party/candidate	40	15	55
	Would not vote	55	17	72
	Don't know/ No answer	30	2	32
<b>Total</b>		<b>200</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>425</b>

<sup>3</sup> In the West Bank sample, some of the better-off youth were Jerusalemites. They were interviewed at the campus of Bethlehem University.

Considering the political affiliation of those interviewed, the original sample of 400 youth seemed to have a better distribution in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip. Such a conclusion is based on a comparison of the party preferences found in this youth survey with the results of Fafo's opinion poll in the OPT from early 2011, which had a representative sample of 1,805 households. The comparison indicated that the Gaza Strip sample of the youth survey contained a higher share of Fatah supporters and a lower share of Hamas supporters than the "true values" for the age group in the Gaza Strip on the whole. Furthermore, the respondents in the Gaza Strip appeared to be more politically interested than average, since few of them said they would not vote had there been a general election (and had they been of voting age) or stated that they did not know who to vote for.<sup>4</sup> While little could be done to correct the latter bias, it was decided to improve political representation by interviewing an extra 25 respondents with an Islamist leaning in and around Gaza City. Thus the overall sample size increased from 400 to 425 respondents.

## 2. Perceptions of the current situation, the future and governance

Although some improvement in the economy in the West Bank has been reported, the overall economic situation in the OPT is difficult, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Levels of poverty are high and the youngest adults are often denied entry into the labour market. Statistics show that unemployment among youth is several times higher than among older labour force members, and over 50% among the youngest.<sup>5</sup> Fafo's

4 According to Fafo's poll in February 2011, 36% of the 18-24-year-olds in the West Bank said they would vote for Fatah had there been elections, while 9% would have voted for Hamas. However, 45% of West Bank respondents aged 18-24 did not want to vote or did not know for which party to cast their vote. In the Gaza Strip, the February poll showed 29% of youth in favour of Fatah and 19% supporting Hamas, while 35% said they would abstain from going to the polls or did not know which party or candidate deserved their vote. A comprehensive tabulation report with poll results is available at <http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/poll2011.html>.

5 Fafo found the following unemployment rates for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip taken together in February 2011: 15-19 years: 58%; 20-24 years: 40%; 25-29 years: 19%; 30-39 years: 9%; 40-49 years: 6%; and 50+ years: 8%. Calculations based on *Tabulation Report*, Table 4.1, [http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian\\_opinions\\_2011/10131.pdf](http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian_opinions_2011/10131.pdf).

research on coping mechanisms and other studies has found that economic hardship had negative implications for young people's ability to secure livelihoods and establish a family.<sup>6</sup> Such grievances, combined with deep dissatisfaction with political governance, were a central part of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in the spring of 2011. In the dynamic political situation that has arisen in the region, what future do young Palestinians see for themselves? Do they think they will be able to realise their potential? Are they satisfied with the performance of the governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip?

### *Personal situation, job and future prospects*

Most of the 30 respondents in the qualitative interviews cited family and job issues as their first priority currently, regardless of their age and to some extent regardless of educational level (although respondents with higher education have more opinions on politics than less educated ones). The answers confirm that it is difficult to get a job and that many take temporary and insecure jobs in order to get by. In the Gaza Strip, it was also reported that employers exploited the youth by demanding prolonged periods of "volunteer" work before considering paid employment. Such training periods have traditionally lasted for a maximum of six months, but several youths we met complained that they had been obliged to work without salary for up to three years before they secured paid employment. Most are dependent on their family to a greater or lesser extent. Not surprisingly, nearly all the 30 qualitative interviews across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip testify to a difficult economic situation for most Palestinians. Many of the young males we interviewed are or will soon turn into breadwinners and many families barely receive the minimum income for running a household.

6 Laura Mitchell, *Coping, Closure, and Gendered Life Transitions: Palestinians' Responses to the Erosion of Male Breadwinning Work*, Fafo Report, Oslo, Fafo, 2010, <http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/20178/index.html>; Laura Mitchell, *Making Ends Meet: Gender and Household Coping Strategies in the West Bank*, Fafo Report, Oslo, Fafo, 2009; Diane Singerman, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth in the Middle East*, Wolfensohn Center for Development and Dubai School of Government, 2007, <http://www.shababinclusion.org/content/document/detail/559/>.

The economy is weak in both places, so that conditions are tough for private entrepreneurs, especially in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, young people are convinced that in order to land a job in the public sector, you need *wasta* – personal connections of the correct political kind, which means well-connected Hamas sympathisers in the Gaza Strip and Fatah sympathisers in the West Bank. The claim that political affiliation determines your chances of getting a job is more widespread in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank, but a notable feature of the qualitative interviews in both places.

The impression that it is difficult to get a job, whether with or without education, holds across the Gaza Strip and West Bank, as does the tendency among the informants in the qualitative interviews to state clearly that job and family matters are their first priority.<sup>7</sup> However, within this picture there is a striking difference in attitudes to the future. When asked about future prospects and their personal situation, West Bank youths are rather upbeat. For example, Issa (23), a recent graduate from Bethlehem, states that the most important issue for him is “to have a sustainable life. Just living and feeling happy, which include having a job, a family, having everything”.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the interviewed youths in the West Bank believe they will achieve their professional and personal goals sooner or later. In contrast to West Bank youth, Gaza Strip youth are more pessimistic. Amal, a female student of 22, is unusually explicit, but her sentiment seems to be shared by many fellow Gazans:

I am not satisfied with my life, because when I work, I work very hard, but get very little money .... What is important for me in the future? – well I have no future in this city, because if I want to work in the government I have to be with Hamas, and that is never going to happen. The other alternative is to work with an organisation, and they pay very little.<sup>9</sup>

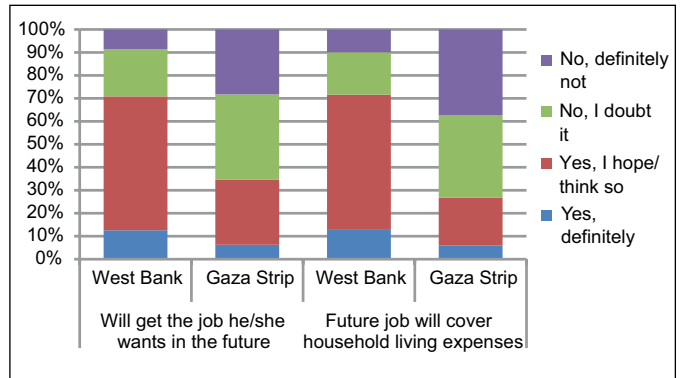
7 In its report from April 2011, the Sharek Youth Forum finds that the political issue of the Fatah/Hamas split is the topmost priority for youth, with living conditions coming second. See Wasim Abu Fasheh, *Situation Report 2011: Winds of Change ... Will They Break down Walls of Oppression?*, Ramallah, Sharek Youth Forum, April 2011.

8 Interview in Bethlehem, October 20th 2011.

9 Interview in Gaza City, October 31st 2011.

Findings from the survey generally confirm the picture painted by the qualitative interviews, although the survey perhaps suggest somewhat more optimism in the West Bank with regard to the ability to succeed in the job market (Figure 1)

**Figure 1: Percentage of those who do not work who think they will get the job they want in the future (N = 342) and who think the pay in their future job will be sufficient to cover a household's living expenses (N = 328)**

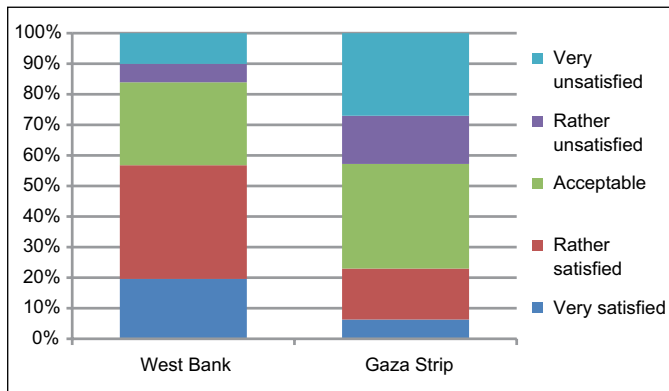


The survey and qualitative interviews reflect the objective economic situations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Being largely shut off from the outside world, the Gaza Strip offers little room for private initiative, the public sector is very poor, and internationally funded organisations are not present to the same degree as in the West Bank. There, economic conditions are better, since foreign aid continues to flow into society; there is a large, foreign-funded NGO sector; there is some degree of trade with Israel; and, in contrast to the Gaza Strip, some West Bankers have access to the Israeli labour market as well.<sup>10</sup>

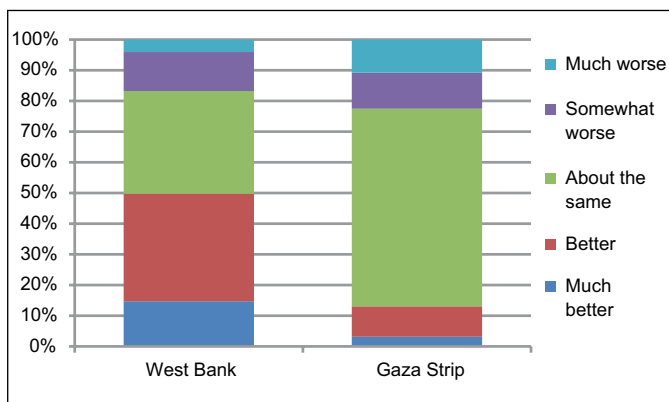
The disparity between the West Bank and Gaza Strip with regard to the general outlook of youth – how they consider their lives now (Figures 2 and 3) and in the future (Figure 4) – is obvious. According to the survey, half the West Bank youth report their life to be better now than six months ago and two-thirds think it will improve in the year to come. In the Gaza Strip, only one in five said they were content currently, no more than one in ten displayed optimism about the prospects for a better future and three in ten thought that their lives would become more difficult in the time ahead.

10 Fafo's February 2011 poll in the OPT found that 15% of all workers in the West Bank had an Israeli employer (*Tabulation Report*, Table 4.5, [http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian\\_opinions\\_2011/10131.pdf](http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian_opinions_2011/10131.pdf)).

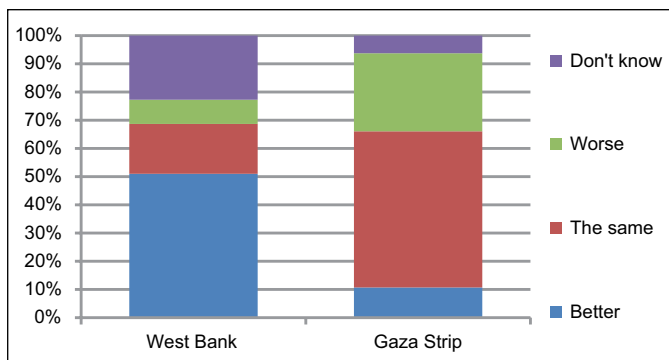
**Figure 2: Satisfaction with life at present (N = 421)**



**Figure 3: Perception of life at present as compared with six months ago (N = 419)**



**Figure 4: Expectations of how life will be one year from now compared with today (N = 422)**



## Governance

In the context of the Arab Spring and a difficult economic situation, an important question concerns young people's perception of the state of governance in their areas. Here the answers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip differ somewhat, but the picture is by no means one of black and white.

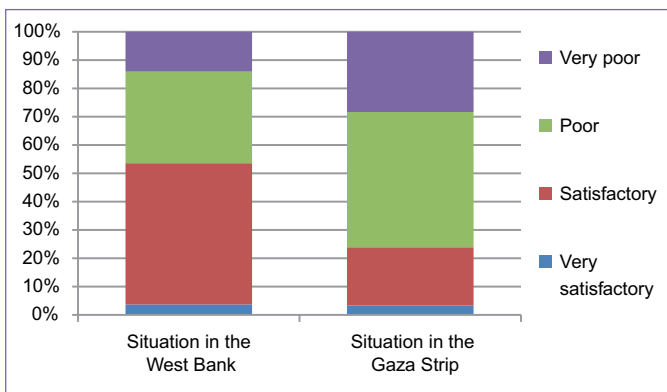
Both the surveys and qualitative interviews show that young people have serious reservations

about governance in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. If we start with the bright side, many interviewees in the West Bank say that the situation they face is better than in the Arab countries that have experienced unrest: freedom of expression and human rights are less violated by the PA than by other Arab governments. In the Gaza Strip, young people from different political factions are unanimous in claiming that the Hamas government has succeeded in improving security in the Gaza Strip. Whereas in the past the Gaza Strip was characterised by widespread anarchy and infighting among families and clans, Hamas has put an end to this and people now feel safer.

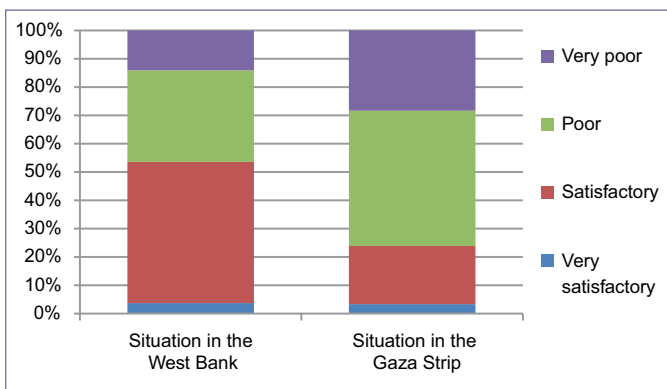
However, the main picture is one of moderate to strong scepticism towards Hamas's and the PA's track record on the issues of democracy, freedom of expression and human rights. The main grievance among youth in both areas is the lack of political freedom. When Gaza Strip and West Bank youth are asked about the degree of democracy in the West Bank, 54% say that it is satisfactory, while 36% say that it is not (Figure 5). The corresponding figures for the Gaza Strip are 24% and 76%, respectively. Only a few at either location claim it is very satisfactory. By and large, Gaza Strip and West Bank youth are in agreement, although compared to West Bankers, the Gazans tend to be slightly more content with the situation in their own area and less content with the state of affairs in the West Bank. Perceptions about freedom of expression essentially mirror those on democracy, as only 26% across the West Bank and Gaza Strip think it is satisfactory in the Gaza Strip, while 54% think it is so in the West Bank (Figure 6).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that as many as 30% of respondents in the West Bank did not have, or chose not to reveal, an opinion on the issue of democracy and freedom of expression in the Gaza Strip. Only 1% and 4%, respectively, of Gazans did not hold an opinion on these two aspects of the situation in the "other" Palestinian territory.

**Figure 5: Perception of the state of democracy in the West Bank (N = 405) and Gaza Strip (N = 360)**



**Figure 6: Perception of the state of freedom of expression in the West Bank (N = 405) and Gaza Strip (N = 357)**



These results indicate that many young people perceive a culture of authoritarianism in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but more so in the latter.

Such sentiments correspond with media reports and research done on governance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In terms of political freedom, an International Crisis Group report from 2010 criticises the harsh PA crackdown on political opponents, and in particular Hamas,<sup>12</sup> while numerous media reports describe the shrinking political and personal freedom in the Gaza Strip under Hamas.<sup>13</sup> The result is a lack of trust in the authorities. In this regard, young people’s misgivings about governance in the Gaza Strip and West Bank recorded during this research are amplified versions of previous poll results. A

12 International Crisis Group, *Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation*, Ramallah/Jerusalem/Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2010.

13 See, for example, Ma’an News Agency, “Rights groups blast new the Gaza Strip courtroom ‘modesty’ rules”, Maannews.net, July 26th 2009, <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=214733>.

synthesis of surveys carried out between 2005 and 2011 by Fafo shows that trust in Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s government in the West Bank is moderate, varying between 30% and 43%, while trust in Prime Minister Ismail Haniya’s government in the Gaza Strip is significantly lower, having dropped from a high of 38% to a 2011 low of 24%.<sup>14</sup>

This question is obviously coupled to the other major misgiving young Palestinians have about governance in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which is political favouritism and corruption in the form of *wasta* – the illegitimate role of personal networks in providing people with jobs and money, based on personal relations rather than merit. In both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, interviewees complain that belonging to the “wrong” political faction makes it hard to get work, while Fatah members in the West Bank and Hamas members in the Gaza Strip face fewer obstacles when they seek jobs. A related complaint in the Gaza Strip is that Hamas has imposed too many taxes on people in an already difficult economic situation and that Hamas leaders use their political position to enrich themselves. Mansour (21) addresses this:

Hamas usually takes money from people by forcing them to pay various taxes. Some people do not have money, but still they have to pay the taxes. Hamas people only look after themselves, and they have higher salaries and more money than others.<sup>15</sup>

Above all, Palestinian youth think about family and job when considering their current situation and future prospects. They are unhappy with the difficult job situation, although West Bank youth express more optimism about the future than young people in the Gaza Strip. As for governance, the picture is quite similar: the PA and Hamas governments come in for quite explicit criticism in regard to democracy, freedom of expression, human rights and corruption, with the situation being seen as worse in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank. However, neither government is completely condemned. Young people are inclined to understand the difficult circumstances

14 Åge A. Tiltnes et al., *Palestinian Opinions about Governance, Institutions and Political Leaders*, Oslo, Fafo, 2011, 5–6.

15 Interview in Gaza City, November 1st 2011.



in which their leaders govern. Hamas is also praised for having achieved a level of security that was previously lacking in the Gaza Strip.

### 3. Level of interest in and engagement with Palestinian politics

The OPT are traditionally characterised by a high degree of political organisation. Today, however, the two main political actors – Fatah and Hamas – have lost legitimacy as a result of internal strife, authoritarian modes of governance and lack of political progress. At the same time, the March 15th Movement, together with what is often referred to as grassroots resistance movements such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign and Stop the Wall campaign hint that a moribund youth activism reappeared during the spring of 2011. Is this a sign of revived youth interest in Palestinian politics? To what degree do Palestinian youth engage in national politics and the resistance, and how do young activists relate to Fatah and Hamas?

Organisations like Fatah, the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas and al-Mubadara have been vehicles of mass mobilisation and organised struggle against occupation, and they have structured internal Palestinian politics. Political factions took the role of mobilising and preparing the youth for both political and military action; they also provided social security and moral support to their followers. However, if the qualitative interviews are indicators of a trend among Palestinian youth, we see a retreat from contentious politics<sup>16</sup> and more engagement in less politicised work, i.e. social/cultural activism, which is often funded by international donors.

In order to illustrate this, we have divided the respondents in the qualitative interviews into three groups: those who are not interested in politics (mainly the youngest ones and those without

higher education); those who are informed, but disillusioned, and have opted out; and activists who face significant impediments created by internal and external actors.

In the first group, teenagers are prominent, and they will not necessarily remain politically passive. They have participated in demonstrations when asked to by superiors at school, and their lack of participation is more due to their young age and scant knowledge than apathy. The older ones in this group seem to have no interest in the resistance project or in Palestinian politics as such. They can be mobilised only when they are attacked directly and physically. Mahmoud, an 18-year-old man from Nablus, has no qualms about co-operating with Israeli companies in his daily work and considers himself lucky to have this business opportunity. Yet he took to the streets when the city was targeted by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF): “I have taken part in political activity. When the Israeli soldiers were invading our city, I used to throw stones. ... I took part in these things for my country, as a kind of defence.”<sup>17</sup>

The withdrawal of the IDF from the Gaza Strip and the removal of many of the internal checkpoints in the West Bank have created fewer arenas for direct confrontation with the Israeli enemy. When Palestinians can move around more freely and are not confronted with the occupation when performing their daily tasks, interest in traditional youth activism has dwindled and there are fewer sites of direct clashes. Mahmoud and others we met also expressed a feeling of powerlessness related to political engagement:

I do not believe that youth can contribute to changing anything. We have nothing in our hands. We have a government and leaders. If there was no government, perhaps we could have done things. But as it is, they will only stop us. It is not only when you throw stones that they stop you. Throwing stones is in a way nothing; they are after bigger issues. If you have any information, you will be arrested. For example, if some people want to hold a demonstration at the Hawara checkpoint at the entrance to the city, the Palestinian police will stop it if they have information about it.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Defined as “interactive, collective making of claims that bear on other people’s interests and involve governments as claimants, objects or claims, or third parties” (Charles Tilly & Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Boulder, Paradigm, 2006, p 22).

<sup>17</sup> Interview in Nablus, October 25th 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Interview in Nablus, October 25th 2011.

The second group consists of people who have been active, but who have opted out because of the trouble it caused them – arrests, loss of social security (joblessness) – and the perception that they are unable to induce change in an entrenched local and international political system of occupation and repression. The low-key tone most of the interviewees adopt about their activism may perhaps be explained by the connection between political affiliation and social/economic opportunities and constraints. There was a general sense of fear of the consequences of engaging in politics that did not follow the mainstream of Fatah politics in the West Bank and Hamas politics in the Gaza Strip. Many interviewees believed that their internet activity was monitored and took precautions as a result, and several talked about a system of informers to both the Palestinian and Israeli intelligence services, creating an atmosphere of distrust when youth are participating in political actions. Yasmina (19), an engineering student active in summer camps as an alternative form of social engagement, told us how her parents warned her against participating in politics:

I have taken part in a few demonstrations, that's all. At the university, I stay away from politics. Also my parents asked me not to be involved in political activities ... because people will report about me to the Israeli intelligence. ... [When] the university and political parties organised demonstrations to go to Ofer prison,<sup>19</sup> my mother warned me and told me not to go because the IDF would be throwing teargas bombs and my mother was afraid.

Sometimes I want to get into politics. But I do not know how and what is the right way to do it, [particularly] when I see young people or boys, 14 or 15 years old, going and throwing stones and then they going to Israeli jails. A friend of mine was arrested and he told me there that were no books in the prison. It was not like when our parents were in prison and they could read all kinds of books and even be educated. The only thing he could do was to read the Koran, even though he was an atheist. Israeli intelligence also puts a lot of pressure on those young people to become their spies.

And you could be caught and go to prison for the simplest reason. Like my cousin, he was talking to his friend on MSN. His friend told him he knew how to make a bomb. And my cousin asked him how to do it and so on – they were just chatting. He was arrested and imprisoned for two years because of this. There were around six friends involved, but they did not do anything or plan anything, just talking; they are not the kind of guys that do things. My cousin is not a person who is into politics.<sup>20</sup>

When Yasmina makes reference to her cousin's experience with surveillance and prison, the fear of political engagement is not only an abstract feeling based on rumours; it is a lived experience of someone close to her. Marwan (24), a practising lawyer in the West Bank, confirmed that he saw many cases of how political activists were arrested and prosecuted in the courts. He could also see how many of these prisoners appearing in the courts had been mistreated. He offers a bleak picture of political life under the PA:

The government here is operating in a way so that the people will be concerned only to get their salary by the end of the month. In this way, people are not thinking about politics. I think this is the agenda for Fayyad's policies. ... If you are active in politics, you will be arrested by the PA. Or if somebody is considered dangerous or a problem in any way for the PA, they will be arrested. This is something I see daily in the courts. I can even see that the charges for this are pre-written.<sup>21</sup>

Marwan had been politically active as a young boy, but as he grew older he realised that the political parties did not represent him and stopped participating in politics. Perhaps even more important was the experience of Marwan's brothers that taught him how affiliation to a political party could create trouble for you:

My brothers were arrested for doing things they thought were very patriotic. Later they understood that what they had done was very wrong. They understood that what they believed they had done for their country was for somebody totally different. So while they

<sup>19</sup> Ofer prison is located in the West Bank and is used to incarcerate Palestinians, including prisoners in administrative detention.

<sup>20</sup> Interview in Bethlehem, October 21st 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

served sentences in Israeli prisons with so many other Palestinians, their leaders would live totally different lives in luxury. When a young man is sent to prison like this, he will lose his future, while the son of his leader is pursuing his future by studying abroad or something. So how is it that it is always we who have to pay the price?<sup>22</sup>

Marwan talked about the experience of his elder brother. After years wasted in prison and now more than 30 years old, for the first time his brother could start planning a life for himself. This convinced Marwan that his brother's projects were complete failures and he wanted to avoid making the same mistakes. Instead, he defines his resistance to the occupation by just staying in the country, continuing his education and being socially engaged. This may be understood as a form of *sumud* (resilience), a time-honoured form of Palestinian resistance.<sup>23</sup> However, it may also be that *sumud* is acquiring a new and different meaning – that Palestinian youth, seeing their land disappearing with settlement expansions and expropriations, attach great value to the simple project of realising their full potential and living meaningful lives in a very difficult context.

Nassim (25) recounts a similar history. He has been active in the PFLP since he was little and has taken part in many activities. He felt he had to be politically engaged, since he was living in an unjust situation. Two of his brothers were imprisoned and during one of the arrests their house was partly destroyed. He also experienced the killing of one of his best friends. He cannot ignore this part of his life, but at one point he felt it had gone far enough. This was when his political past excluded him from jobs:

I got a job where I believed I would stay for a long time. I took a loan from the bank to finish building my house to get ready for my wedding. But there were some problems in this job, so I left. ... This job was with the Palestinian intelligence [service]. At that time the Palestinian economy was so bad that

I needed a job whatever it was. So I even accepted the job with the intelligence [service]. But when the intelligence [service] learned that I was PFLP, I was fired. This also happened [to me] with another job. Once I got a job in a bank, but the PA put down their foot, although the bank had accepted me already and I in a way had got the job. But I lost it again when the PA interfered.<sup>24</sup>

It is evident that the security services interfere in politics, and that belonging to other parties than Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip may affect people's job opportunities and personal security negatively. Combined with the risk of arrest and imprisonment, this makes the threshold for entering contentious politics high.

The third group comprises activists whose engagement is constrained by the factionalism of Palestinian politics and the parameters imposed by international donors. Affiliation with different factions, such as Fatah, Hamas and the PFLP, is connected to political polarisation, favouritism and corruption in the OPT. For youths who want to be active without entering this highly polarised field, the alternative is the plethora of NGOs that engage in social work and capacity-building, sometimes with political overtones, sometimes not. Quite a few respondents are or have been involved in social and cultural projects and community development. Many of the activities are run by NGOs. The proliferation of such organisations is not a new phenomenon. Before the first *intifada*, activists who were critical of the PLO engaged in the same kind of developmental and educational work (and these were crucial to the organisation of the *intifada*).<sup>25</sup> However, it is not always possible to escape the consequences of factionalism even here. For example, the Sharek Youth Forum, a large and well-known youth organisation present both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, had its Gaza offices shut down by Hamas in late 2010, supposedly because of its liberal gender-mixing practices and its co-operation with the UN Relief and Works Agency.<sup>26</sup> When internal Palestinian

22 Ibid.

23 For the important concept of *sumud*, see Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, p 49; Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment*, London, Pluto Press, 2010.

24 Interview in Bethlehem, October 28th 2011.

25 Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p 612.

26 *Palestine Monitor*, "Palestine Monitor – Sharek Youth Forum closed", December 2nd 2010, <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article1636>.

politics does not impede NGOs' activism, their reliance on foreign funding may do so. As Mazen al-Ja'bari of the Youth Development Forum explained, the hundreds of NGOs established in the OPT after 1994 rely mostly on foreign funding and are dependent on specific funding programmes, so that they are not free to choose to do what they want.<sup>27</sup>

Foreign donors uphold a certain level of activity in both the governmental and NGO sectors while ensuring that this activity is not channelled into active resistance against Israeli occupation, thereby draining the political energy of Palestinian society. On the government level, Anne le More has analysed this process. Noting how an economic rather than political organisation – the World Bank – assumed ever greater influence in providing aid to the Palestinians, Le More comments:

this evolution only exemplified the extent to which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had become “normalized” and the Palestinian state-building effort de-politicized by a decade of international concentration on assuaging the socio-economic and humanitarian symptoms of the crisis, rather than tackling the root causes and diplomatic challenges and obstacles impeding upon the resolution of the conflict.<sup>28</sup>

At the NGO level, activists in the youth organisation Juzoor echoed these claims, complaining that donors collectively and unpredictably stopped funding one kind of activity and started funding another according to the latest diplomatic fashion. This made it difficult to carry out the kind of politically and socially relevant work Juzoor wanted to engage in.<sup>29</sup>

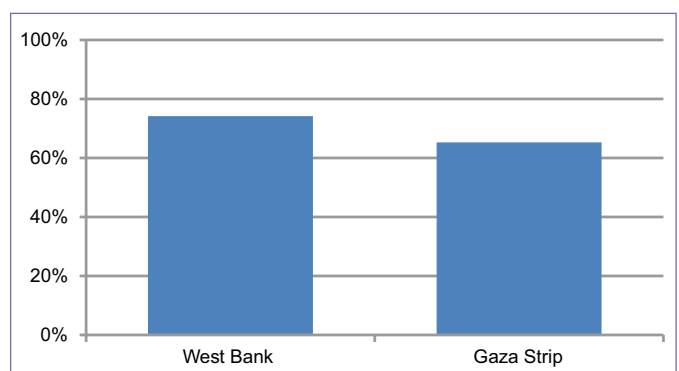
Thus, both the rules of the political game in internal Palestinian politics and interventions from international donors encourage a withdrawal from politics and the channelling of youthful energy towards less contentious forms of engagement.

## Attitudes to the bid for statehood at the UN

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's bid for statehood at the UN in late September 2011 was a major event in international politics. How has it resonated among Palestinian youth?

The simple answer is that it is approved of by a majority (Figure 7), but that it has failed to inspire enthusiasm.

**Figure 7: Percentage who approve of the UN statehood bid in the West Bank (N = 182) and Gaza Strip (N = 216)**



A solid majority of 69% support Abbas's move, and West Bankers are somewhat more positive than in the Gaza Strip. However, celebrations in the West Bank were quite subdued in the wake of Abbas's speech at the General Assembly and it was deliberately ignored in the Gaza Strip.<sup>30</sup> The cautious optimism is reflected in the interviews with Palestinian youth. Issa, the 23-year-old with higher education in Bethlehem, commented: “I think he did something positive, but I think it came a little late. I would have loved to see this in the UN three years ago, but I support what he did.”<sup>31</sup>

In a peculiar Palestinian take on the Arab Spring, a number of the interviewees who were positive about the statehood bid associate this initiative with the popular revolts that have taken place across the Arab world. There is a certain discrepancy here. The essence of the Arab Spring is to oppose existing regimes. However, in the OPT, Abbas, who heads a less-than-democratic

27 Interview in Jerusalem, December 12th 2011.

28 Anne le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo: Political Guilt, Wasted Money*, London & New York, Routledge, 2008, p 110.

29 Interview with Musab Abbas in Ramallah, December 13th 2011.

30 Adrian Blomfield, “Palestinians greet Mahmoud Abbas UN speech with joy, fear – and disbelief”, *The Telegraph*, n.d., <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/8785481/Palestinian-statehood-Abbas-UN-speech-meets-joy-fear-and-disbelief.html>.

31 Interview in Bethlehem, October 20th 2011.

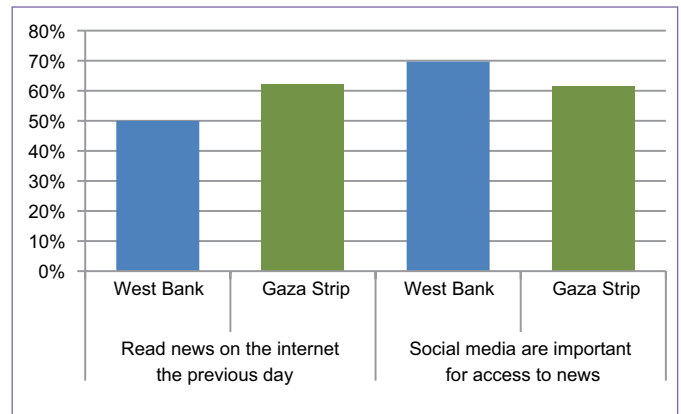
regime in the West Bank, is in effect considered to be part of this revolt, as several interviewees in the qualitative interviews state that one of the Arab Spring's manifestations in Palestine was the statehood bid. The fact that the main enemy for any Palestinian is the Israeli government and army is, of course, one explanation for this take on the Arab Spring, but there might also be another factor at play that has to do with the political dynamics in the OPT, which will be addressed in section 4, below.

It is interesting to note that among West Bank youth, those interviewees with the most political awareness and highest level of activism were in fact very negative about the initiative. They expressed fear that the PLO seat in the UN might be lost and that the refugees' right of return might be (further) jeopardised. Akram (24), trained in social science and working with an NGO, described it as "the biggest violation of our rights since the *nakba*", as it ignored UN resolution 194 and gave up all the land except the 1967 occupied territories, according to him.<sup>32</sup> These sentiments put activist young people in the West Bank on a par with many older intellectuals and Palestinians abroad, who have voiced strong reservations about the bid for statehood precisely because of the many uncertainties and risks surrounding it.<sup>33</sup>

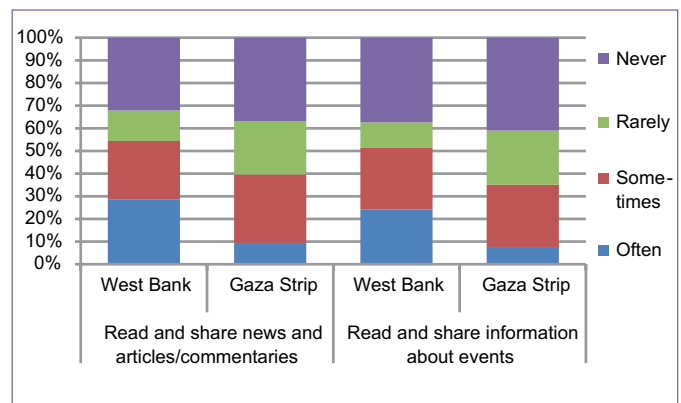
Asurprising finding is that many of the respondents in the qualitative interviews in the Gaza Strip have not heard about or have only vague knowledge about the president's UN bid for statehood (four out of ten in-depth interviewed youths in the Gaza Strip). The reason this is surprising is that most youth are avid internet users who say they regularly visit Facebook and the Palestinian news website Ma'an for news and socialising (see also Figures 8 and 9 for results from the survey on the use of the internet and social media). This fact may suggest two things: firstly, that the potential of the internet and social media to spread information and mobilise should not be exaggerated; on the contrary, many of the youth we spoke to regard the internet as a distraction, stealing time that former generations perhaps

channelled into political work.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, it may indicate that Hamas has been quite efficient in its effort to downplay information about the UN bid in the Gaza Strip.

**Figure 8: Percentage who read news on the internet the previous day (N = 425) and who believe social media are important sources of news (N = 419), by region**



**Figure 9: The extent to which youth use social media to read and share news and articles (N = 415) and to read and share information about events (N = 412), by region**



In sum, Palestinian youth do not engage in politics, either because of lack of interest, disillusionment or fear of the consequences political engagement may have. There is no enthusiasm for the governing projects of Hamas and the PA, and Abbas's bid for statehood at the UN has not galvanised youth into supporting this project actively. There is at most a passive acceptance or approval of the initiative, and among the most informed young people there is outright hostility to the plan.

<sup>32</sup> Interview in Bethlehem, October 24th 2011.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Raja Khalidi, "Going to the United Nations, sanctions, and the tick-tock of the Palestinian spring", *Jadaliyya*, September 12th 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2600/going-to-the-united-nations-sanctions-and-the-tick>.

<sup>34</sup> This analysis is supported by the Sharek Youth Forum; see Abu Fasheh, *Situation Report 2011*.

## 4. The role of young people in Palestinian politics

The developments in the Arab world during 2011 signal the possibility of an increased and sustained youth participation in national politics in several Arab countries. Shortly after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the Palestinian NGO Sharek Youth Forum published a situation report that was quite optimistic about youth participation. The report stated that “the Arab revolutions have inspired large sectors of the Palestinian youth who are depressed by the state of political division and the weakening resistance against the occupation”.<sup>35</sup> It concluded that “a number of recent youth initiatives with real signs of maturity are emerging. The common thread of these initiatives is calling for the resumption of a popular resistance approach against the Israeli occupation, settlements and the separation wall”.<sup>36</sup>

Are there any signs that the relatively small number of youth who have engaged in politics are able to build new, sustainable organisations that may challenge the dominant forces of Fatah and Hamas? Are these organisations capable of engaging youth themselves or do other political actors offer the youth a role?

Shortly before and during the Arab Spring, two new youth initiatives in the OPT attracted some international media attention and were hailed as Palestinian contributions to a youthful uprising against an ossified political order. These were Gaza Youth Breaks Out (GYBO), a collective of angry young bloggers in the Gaza Strip, and the March 15th Movement, which organised mass rallies in the Gaza Strip and West Bank to call for an end to the political separation between the two areas. A third kind of movement in which youths participate and which has received much attention in recent years is the so-called “popular resistance”, such as regular protests against the Israeli-built separation wall and checkpoints and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p 56.

## *Gaza Youth Breaks Out and the March 15th Movement*

The GYBO manifesto was publicised online in December 2010. A cry born out of desperation and anger, it quickly received considerable media coverage. Although the manifesto focused on a number of areas, Hamas came in for very sharp criticism of its governance of the Gaza Strip:

During the last years, Hamas has been doing all they can to control our thoughts, behavior and aspirations. Here in Gaza we are scared of being incarcerated, interrogated, hit, tortured, bombed, killed. We cannot move as we want, say what we want, do what we want.<sup>37</sup>

Writing about the manifesto in December 2010, *The Observer* stated that it had “travelled around the world at an unexpected speed and has harvested thousands of supporters, many of them human rights activists, who say they are ready to help”.<sup>38</sup> The manifesto was hailed as a “document that could be a turning point in the life of the Strip”.

Even higher hopes were put on the March 15th Movement, which is described as a loose network of young, social media-friendly activists organising globally and injecting new life into the Palestinian popular struggle, and whose goal is to create a united, non-violent protest movement by healing political divisions.<sup>39</sup> It succeeded in pressuring Fatah and Hamas to engage in reconciliation talks in May. Al-Jazeera commented that “reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah may present the first victory of a nascent Palestinian youth movement” and described it as having “long-term” goals,<sup>40</sup> while *Foreign Policy* wrote about “the youth movement’s newfound power”.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ana Carbajosa, “Gazan youth issue manifesto to vent their anger with all sides in the conflict”, *The Observer*, January 2nd 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/02/free-gaza-youth-manifesto-palestinian>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

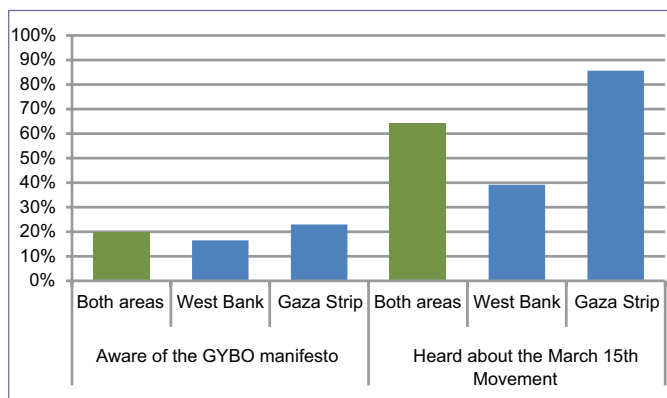
<sup>39</sup> Rachel Shabi, “Palestine lost”, *Foreign Policy*, July 13th 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/13/palestine\\_lost?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/13/palestine_lost?page=full).

<sup>40</sup> Noura Erakat, “Palestinian youth: new movement, new borders”, *Al-Jazeera English*, May 4th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/05/201153101231834961.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Nour Odeh, “Palestine’s youth revolt”, *Foreign Policy*, March 23rd 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/23/palestines\\_youth\\_revolt?page=0,1&wpisrc=obnetwork](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/23/palestines_youth_revolt?page=0,1&wpisrc=obnetwork).

However, judging by the Fafo surveys and qualitative interviews, these two movements have had only a limited impact on Palestinian youth, as shown in Figure 10. Only 20% of Palestinian youth have heard of GYBO, with relatively minor differences between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The qualitative interviews give the same impression that the initiative is not well known. Furthermore, those well-informed interviewees who know about GYBO tend to dislike its style and were not particularly enthusiastic about the initiative. GYBO later released a version 2.0 of its manifesto, but the group has since failed to make much of an impact on Palestinian politics and media.<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 10: Percentage that are aware of the GYBO manifesto (N = 416) and have heard about the March 15th Movement (N = 417)**



The March 15th Movement is a direct consequence of the Arab Spring. Inspired by their counterparts in other Arab countries, youths in the West Bank and Gaza Strip marched in the streets on March 15th 2011 to demand an end to political division, in what was a clear protest against the policies of both Fatah and Hamas, the two dominant Palestinian political factions. This movement is better known than GYBO (64% are familiar with it), but there are great differences between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, where Fatah attempted to co-opt the movement's demonstrations rather than suppress them, 39% say that they have heard about it. In the Gaza Strip, 89% answered that they knew about the movement. This may have to do with the fact that the movement was seen as more of a challenge to the authorities in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank and that Hamas cracked down rather hard on the demonstrations, beating and arresting

participants.<sup>43</sup> Mansour (21), a university student in the Gaza Strip and active in the 15th March Movement, told us how he had avoided arrest during a demonstration by running away. The unlucky ones were arrested and detained for between a week and a month.<sup>44</sup> Amal had a more vivid description:

Last semester at the university we had a demonstration. It was only for one hour. We only wanted to stand and say that "Fatah and Hamas are one united hand". But the members from Hamas at the university took bats and started to beat us. They told us it was not our business to do this and that our only business was to study. That night they took both boys and girls to the police station. And this was only because they wanted to express their opinion.<sup>45</sup>

By the dual strategy of co-opting the March 15th Movement and engaging in reconciliation talks, the authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have seemingly managed to ensure that the movement has not (at least thus far) evolved into a more sustained oppositional youth movement. A feature article on the Palestinian news site Ma'an from July 2011 asks where the "Facebook youth" had gone, and the answer given by several activists is that both Fatah and Hamas sought to undermine the movement by inserting their own people in it and by resorting to direct threats and violence.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, by engaging in negotiations, Hamas and Fatah leaders have taken some of the wind out of the sails of the protest movement. Several youths, including an activist in the movement, considered the reconciliation talks as a success of the 15th March Movement and pointed to it as an example of how Palestinian youth are able to play a political role in society.<sup>47</sup>

At any rate, home-grown grassroots activity

43 See, for example, the call for help issued by the youth movement in the Gaza Strip on March 17th 2011 on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/notes/majed-abusalama/for-immediate-release-from-the-youth-movement-to-end-the-division-in-palestine-s/10150120720744435?ref=nf>.

44 Interview in Gaza City, November 1st 2011.

45 Interview in Gaza City, October 31st 2011.

46 Ma'an News Agency, "The 'Facebook youth', Palestine branch: about-face backwards?", July 5th 2011, <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=402717>.

47 Interview in Gaza City, November 1st 2011.

42 The website address of the group is <http://gazaybo.wordpress.com/>.

among the youth in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip seems to have dissipated somewhat after the unity demonstrations in March 2011. One interviewee who had actively participated in the 15th March Movement in the Gaza Strip claimed that the movement was currently inactive. In the West Bank, informed interviewees were impressed by the initiative, but not its results.<sup>48</sup>

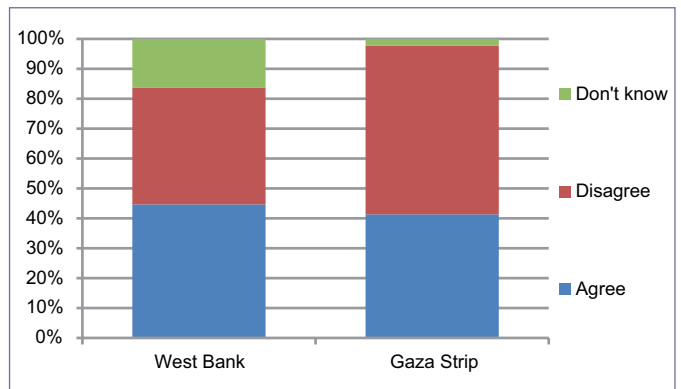
Perhaps surprisingly after having witnessed the youthful revolts in the Arab world, the survey indicates that less than a half of the respondents in our survey actually agree that young people should demonstrate against their older leaders (Figure 11). The Arab Spring, which the March 15th Movement was inspired by, is exactly about criticising the patriarchs at the top of the political pyramid, and about Arab youth taking the political initiative and making their voices heard. Why, then, was the March 15th Movement met with relatively little enthusiasm among the majority and why did it dissipate so quickly?

There may be a two-pronged explanation for this, part of which has to do with the unique Palestinian situation and part to do with the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007. Firstly, the Gaza Strip and West Bank are occupied, and, unlike the situation in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, the PA and Hamas governments are more than just regimes that have failed to provide democracy and economic growth for those they govern; they are also the official representatives of the Palestinians in their struggle to end the Israeli occupation. In addition, of course, the main enemy of the people remains the Israeli state, not the Palestinian leadership. This fact creates great difficulties for a movement that focuses its criticism on the Palestinian leaders, as the March 15th Movement is seen to do. Many are sceptical about diverting attention and energy away from the main issue of the occupation, the obvious shortcomings of the PA and Hamas government notwithstanding.

Secondly, the split between the Fatah-dominated West Bank and the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip in 2007 resulted in widespread political anomie among the young. According to a long-time activist, the split “led to a crisis for everybody. Many organisations were divided and fronts were

hard. There was a complete split (*infisal*) on all levels: at university, at work, in the street. As a consequence, many youths became alienated”.<sup>49</sup>

**Figure 11: Level of agreement with the statement “Young people are doing the right thing when they organise demonstrations criticising the older generation in Fatah and Hamas”: youth in the West Bank (N = 197) versus youth in the Gaza Strip (N = 225)**



Youths themselves offer different explanations for why they cannot assume the same role in politics as youths in other Arab countries. In the West Bank, they believed it was necessary to have a (Palestinian) state as a precondition for further change in Palestinian society. In the Gaza Strip, however, the centre of attention was on unity between Fatah and Hamas, because the Palestinian people had to unite to effectively fight the Israeli occupation and change the current situation. In both cases, however, the initiative for getting this done seems to be left to the established leadership, reflecting frustration with and alienation from politics. Many of those we interviewed have a positive attitude to the youthful revolts elsewhere at the same time as they have little faith in their own ability to influence events.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Popular resistance and al-Harak al-Shababi***

Both GYBO and the March 15th Movement focus criticism on internal Palestinian affairs. When we move to the more traditional field of resistance, there are signs of a youth movement that may

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Mazen al-Ja'bari in al-Ram, December 22nd 2011.

<sup>50</sup> The survey perhaps provides a slightly more positive take on young people's perception of their own political role: more than half of the respondents in the West Bank (54%) and nearly half in the Gaza Strip (46%) think Palestinian youth are able to influence their political leaders a lot or to some extent.

<sup>48</sup> Interview in Bethlehem, October 24th 2011.



be more viable than the ones we have reviewed thus far. In an important sense, the Palestinians do not need other Arabs to teach them how to mobilise massively for political change – the first and second *intifadas* prove that. During the last ten years or so, there has been a growing revival of deep-rooted Palestinian practices of non-violent resistance against the occupation – so-called “popular resistance”. Palestinians resist by organising weekly protest marches against the separation wall in places like Bil’in, Ni’lin and al-Nabi Salih on the West Bank; they march towards the no-go Israeli military zone in Gaza; and the BDS campaign has gathered Palestinian and international activists since 2005 in an effort to boycott Israel on all fronts. There has been considerable attention to this kind of activism for some time, with a wealth of books and media reports on non-violent resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Although Palestinian political leaders have endorsed this kind of resistance, it has a critical edge in terms of both Hamas and the PA. The hard core of activists have chosen public, peaceful protest as their medium, thus departing from Hamas’s strategy of violent confrontation with the occupier; and by rejecting normalisation and dialogue with the occupier they take a much tougher stance towards Israel than the PA. One of the main figures of this movement, Jamal Jum’a, actually claims that the PA tries to eliminate popular resistance by not allowing Palestinians in the PA-controlled Area A to join demonstrations.<sup>52</sup> Although the demonstrations can often be quite small, they make an impact. We witnessed how a group of 30-40 demonstrators successfully disrupted and then completely sabotaged a Palestinian-Israeli conference about coexistence and confederation in East Jerusalem in December 2012, one of the organisers of which was the rector of al-Quds University, Sari Nusaybah.<sup>53</sup>

This broad and decentralised resistance movement seems to have provided an umbrella for a truly independent and critical youth movement, commonly called al-Harak al-Shababi (the youth movement) by Palestinians. According to Jamal Jum’a, founder of the Stop the Wall campaign, its leaders have focused on engaging youth from 2006, because they saw that they had failed to reach universities and schools, which form an important mobilisation base. They organised exhibitions, lectures and local boycott teams, and successfully made the big universities (Najah, Bir Zeit, al-Quds) stop selling Israeli products. They also co-operated with youth centres in villages. Jum’a considers the March 15th Movement and, to a greater extent, al-Harak al-Shababi as fruits of these efforts. He points out that al-Harak is truly independent and was not co-opted during the spring of 2011.<sup>54</sup>

Mazen al-Ja’bary, head of the Youth Development Department of Orient House, concurs that there is an evolving independent youth movement centred on non-violent resistance. Describing a youth conference he co-organised in Jerusalem in November, he says turnout was high (around 200) and the mood was crystal clear: the participants wanted to fight occupation and wanted no more negotiations. They were pro-boycott, and there was also a national awareness that encompassed all of the occupied territories, the diaspora and the Palestinians inside Israel.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Harak al-Shababi is a small and decentralised grouping of young activists and is limited to the West Bank (as far as the authors of this report are aware). However, it has the advantage that it does not focus its activities on internal Palestinian affairs at the same time as it has joined a third way between Hamas’s strategy of violence and the negotiations paradigm prevalent in the PA. It may have future potential, but at the time of writing, it is a small movement comprising devoted activists, not a mass movement by any standards.

51 For two recent examples, see Michael Bröning, *The Politics of Change in Palestine: State-building and Non-violent Resistance*, London & New York, Pluto Press, 2011; Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine*.

52 Ida Audeh, “Jamal Jum’a: PA ‘killing popular resistance’”, *Electronic Intifada*, August 8th 2011, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/jamal-juma-pa-killing-popular-resistance/10249#.TtYUkHq13vg>.

53 As witnessed by author in the Shaykh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, December 12th 2012.

54 Interview in Jerusalem, December 22nd 2012.

55 Interview in Jerusalem, December 12th 2011.

## 5. Conclusion: an exit from politics?

The overall picture painted in the preceding pages is predominantly one of a youth exit from politics in Palestine, despite pockets of political activism connected to popular resistance. There may be many reasons why young Palestinians are retreating from politics. Obviously, the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 has caused widespread alienation among youth and paralysed many organisations. However, there are also more long-standing and structural problems; here we would like to point to four. Firstly, there seems to be a perception among youth that a political elite has taken control over the definition and modes of resistance, and aims at being its sole representatives vis-à-vis Israel and the international community. Unlike during the first *intifada*, ordinary people at the grassroots are discouraged from taking things into their own hands by the post-1993 political elite, which aspires to represent the resistance. The Oslo agreement and its institutional framework facilitated such a development. As the Palestinian sociologist Jamil Hilal writes:

Since Oslo, the institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization ... have been marginalized and effectively absorbed into the Palestinian Authority ... the self-governing body with limited powers established in 1994. Meanwhile, the PLO's sectoral and professional associations – the mass and trade union organizations of students, women, workers, engineers, teachers, writers and journalists, among others – gradually lost the role they used to play of engaging all parts of the Palestinian people in the national struggle for liberation.<sup>56</sup>

Secondly, as described in section 2, above, there is a widespread culture of fear with regard to political activity. Long-standing factionalism and authoritarian tendencies in the PA and Hamas governments make politically conscious youths think twice before they engage in critical political activities like demonstrations and campaigns for unity. Some of the most critical voices choose

political exit rather than confrontation with the authorities.

The third reason is that international aid to the Palestinians effectively deflects energy away from political activism to the benefit of less contentious social and cultural initiatives, as analysed in section 2. Donors' dogged determination to stay within the peace process paradigm and the ever-changing priorities of aid providers make it hard for NGO activists to engage in the political work they would like to.

Furthermore, Makram Khoury-Machool shows that international funding has allowed only a "passive" resistance. In a study of so-called "cyber resistance" among Palestinian youth, he argues that

passive resistance will continue for as long as the international community continues to allocate funds through the Palestinian government or independent NGOs, during which time Palestinian youth will continue to nurture their ICT [information and communication technology] skills to full effect.<sup>57</sup>

Khoury-Machool does not mention what it takes to transform this passive cyber resistance into an active one and it is hard to see how this may happen in the near future, given the constraints on youth activism we have reviewed above.

Fourthly, Palestinian youth do not seem to think that their situation is desperate enough to warrant large-scale departure from the political routine and instead try to realise themselves as a silent form of resistance, leaving the political initiative in the hands of their leaders. Active resistance against Israeli occupation is seen as the responsibility of the political leadership, and all agree that political unification is a requirement for effective resistance to resume. As for the attitude to these two dominant organisations, there is widespread dissatisfaction with their political and economic track record, particularly in the Gaza Strip, but this seems to be partly offset by Hamas's success in dealing with crime and anarchy there and the

<sup>56</sup> Jamil Hilal, "Palestinian answers in the Arab Spring", al-Shabaka Policy Brief, May 2011, <http://al-shabaka.org/policy-brief/politics/palestinian-answers-arab-spring>.

<sup>57</sup> Makram Khoury-Machool, "Cyber resistance: Palestinian youth and emerging internet culture", Linda Herrera & Asef Bayat, eds, *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p 123.

PA's improvement of the economy in the West Bank.

Several of the young people we spoke to regard the situation in the OPT as fundamentally different from that in other Arab countries. Although dissatisfied with the degree of freedom of expression and the repercussions of participating in oppositional political activity, they believe they live in a democracy and not under a dictatorship. This is because their leaders were elected and not inherited through family membership. They believe that the situations that led to revolutions in neighbouring countries were worse than in Palestine. Yasmina, for example, believes that governance in Palestine is much better than in other Arab countries, although there is room for improvement.<sup>58</sup> Also, a TV interview with President Abbas recently seems to have boosted his democratic credentials among many. Asked what he would do if he saw similar protests in Palestine as witnessed in Egypt, Abbas answered that he would resign at the first sign of protests against him.<sup>59</sup> Several of our respondents used this as an illustration of the democratic governance of Palestine and why there was no need for a revolution initiated by the youth.

The developments described above lead to a situation in which the majority seem to let politics be politics, as long as there is no direct physical threat against their well-being. The minority of activist-leaning youth either direct less of their energies towards political work or grow thoroughly disillusioned and abandon activism altogether.

Palestinian youth have by and large remained onlookers rather than participants in two momentous events in 2011: the Arab Spring and the much-vaunted Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN. Disillusioned with politics, but not discontent enough to revolt, they simply stay away for the greater part. Existing youth groups, whether outside or inside established organisations, will have to work hard to come up with a formula to engage their young compatriots. The governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip do not face an imminent explosion of youth anger – but neither do they inspire much enthusiasm among the young people they are dependent on to wage a successful liberation struggle.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview in Bethlehem, November 21st 2011.

<sup>59</sup> 'Interview in Nablus, October 25th 2011.'