

"Sorry, You Have Been out of Bounds": A Profile of the Palestinian Youth Generation

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Brief Analysis

In his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/445?msg=welcome_stranger), (1895) French sociologist and social psychologist Gustave Le Bon writes, “The great upheavals which precede changes of civilisations... seem at first sight determined more especially by political transformations.” However, he argues, “A more attentive study of these events shows that behind their apparent causes the real cause is generally seen to be a profound modification in the ideas of the peoples.”

A systematic tracking of underlying trends in Palestinian society apart from the common preoccupation with political and security issues reveals that Palestinian society is undergoing dramatic change of the kind described by Le Bon.

At the center of this change is the younger generation of adult Palestinians. Members of this group have become more publicly active in recent years, but have yet to fully leave their mark on the Palestinian sphere, which they will ultimately lead in the future. Given this inevitable transition, it is important to outline the complex portrait of the young Palestinian generation living in the “domestic” regions—meaning the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, and how their frustrations are likely to shape their future actions.

Such an undertaking requires a combination of academic, theoretical research and direct contact with younger Palestinians themselves, as well as engagement with the Palestinian public sphere and familiarity with the factors that shape its cultural world.

Historically, younger generations have played a key role in modern Palestinian politics and society. Palestinian culture has often emphasized and admired the values of revolution and youth, which are seen as a principle source for national salvation. Against the backdrop of a prolonged national struggle, and in light of continual disappointment with traditional leadership, the youth are characterized by ingenuity, activism, and a sense of mission and sacrifice.

In this context, the current ‘youth generation’ is seen not only as the successors to the Revolutionary Generation—which after 1948 presented itself as the antithesis to the Nakba generation, blamed for the Nakba itself—but also as successors to the young leaders of the first and second Intifadas (1987 and 2000). Indeed, over the years, Palestinian protest movements and their leadership have developed in an almost identical manner to their predecessors: ‘rebellious’ adolescents evolved into veteran leadership then criticized by contemporary youth, with the next generation repeating the cycle.

However, as members of the universal ‘Generation Z,’ Palestinian youth today are in many ways radically different from Palestinian youth of the past. These young people draw inspiration from several sources, some of which are contradictory, which generates a sense of confusion, uprootedness, and uncertainty about the future. This “post-Oslo” generation, born since the 1990s, lives under hybrid circumstances characterized by a combination of Palestinian self-governance and the continuation of Israeli control.

Three other, broader concepts have also affected this generation: the ‘Arab Spring,’ the new digital realm, and the modern globalized discourse among youth. The Arab Spring, whose consequences still reverberate throughout the region, encouraged defiance against authority figures, including parents, public dignitaries, and members of the national leadership. Simultaneously, the digital realm provides instant gratification through the charms of western consumer culture on the one hand and easily accessible exposure to extremist groups’ ideology, such as that of the Islamic State, on the other. Finally, along with the issue of national rights that has long been a focal point for Palestinians, the modern discourse of youth worldwide is increasingly emphasizing the importance of civil and individual rights as well.

Along with these new influences, Palestinian youth are subjected to tremendous societal and economic pressure, which generates personal and collective cognitive dissonance among them. They are interested in individual development and self-actualization, but are instructed by Palestinian leadership to continue fighting and sacrificing for the collective good. They aspire to have a career and acquire an education, but are held back by unemployment and poverty. Through the internet, they are exposed to permissive modern culture, but continue to live in a traditional society with strict behavioral codes.

As such, it is hardly surprising that many Palestinian youth report a feeling of collective suffocation, difficulties communicating with their parents, and profound alienation from political leadership. Like many members of the Palestinian public, the younger generation seems to have essentially given up

on the national administration of the Palestinian Authority and displays impatience with the older “era of revolutionary slogans.” These feelings are leading to a trend of apoliticism, clearly manifested in the reduction in membership within political organizations and declining participation in the activities these organizations promote.

A study of basic **demographic data**

http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%2010.html

http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%2010.html further highlights the difficult problem the younger generation faces. In 1997, the number of Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was approximately 2.8 million. In 2007, this figure spiked to 3.7 million, and today estimates put this number at a little under 4.9 million.

Of these 4.9 million, 47 percent are 17 or younger and 71 percent are 29 or younger. The number of Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 29—an age group often demographically characterized by activity and agitation—is more than a million and a half: a little over a million people out of 2.9 million living the West Bank (34 percent) and almost 580,000 people out of 1.9 million in the Gaza Strip (30 percent). In light of the rapid growth rate of the Palestinian population, the importance of the younger generation as a section of the general public is rising.

This large group of Palestinians are facing dire economic prospects. Education in particular is a central source of frustration for Palestinian youth due to the accelerating gap between the number of people with academic degrees and those who are then able to secure jobs matching their degrees. Indeed, the percentage of West Bankers who earned a bachelor’s degree **[rose](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/Education-1994-2017-10E.html)** (**https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/Education-1994-2017-10E.html**) from 5.3 in 1997 to 11.8 in 2015, while the percentage of Gazans with these credentials **increased** (**https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/Education-1994-2017-10E.html**) from 5.9 to 15.1 during the same period. However, the unemployment rate among young degree holders, which stands at 55.8 percent, is creating a severe crisis among many graduates due to the difference between their expectations for post-degree life and the reality of joblessness.

However, **unemployment is not only a problem of the highly educated; it is a challenge facing entire younger generation**

<https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/census2017/>). Among 20 to 24 year olds, the overall unemployment rate stands at 43.7 percent (31 percent in the West Bank and 63.2 percent in Gaza), while among 25 to 29 year olds it is 37.2 percent (26.3 percent in the West Bank and 53.1 percent in Gaza). These numbers stand in contrast to the general unemployment rate for Palestinians at 27.4 percent (18 percent in West Bank and 43.6 percent in Gaza). Against the backdrop of the ongoing civil crisis, the younger generation’s distress is particularly stark in the Gaza Strip. Accordingly, there is a surge in phenomena such as crime, suicide, prostitution, drug addiction, difficulty starting a family, divorce, and immigration, especially of highly educated individuals, among young Gazans, especially affecting highly educated individuals.

The wave of terror attacks that began in late 2015, nicknamed “Habba” (outburst) by Palestinians and the “Intifada of the Individuals” by Israelis, was a central expression of the younger Palestinian generation’s increasing influence and frustrations. Though Palestinian youth were the undisputed drivers of this campaign, it lacked organized leadership, an organizational framework, or a clear agenda. Rather, most perpetrators were young individuals—urban, single, and educated.

Indeed, out of 250 perpetrators who were behind the attacks that took place between October 2015 and March 2016—the most intense period of the Habba—170 were residents of cities and towns in West Bank, with the rest living in local villages. The average age of the perpetrators was 21.5; 112 were under the age of twenty while only 24 were over thirty. A significant number did not have identifiable traditional markers of societal alienation—they did not come from broken homes and had not dropped out of school.

What this group did share as a prominent characteristic was an almost total lack of familiarity with Israelis and with Israel, a factor that played a significant role in their ability to demonize the “other.” While the wave of terror did gradually decline, it should be understood as reflecting the Palestinian youth’s ongoing rage and frustration at their circumstances, which could erupt more fully as a result of political, economic, or social change.

Palestinian youth nowadays are not merely another incarnation of the inter-generational tension that is a prominent feature of overarching Palestinian life. As a matter of fact, The tension among the younger generation itself and between youth and their parents’ generation appears to be worsening.

These circumstances are a recipe for a future eruption, which could be directed against Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and even against the Hamas government. In the latter two cases, Abbas leaving office could spark increased political frustration, while Hamas’s efforts to redirect the frustration of Gaza’s youth towards Israel—as illustrated by the campaign near the Israel-Gaza border barrier during this past year—could prove less successful than Hamas hopes at preventing ire directed towards the organization as well.

In the December 2015 article **“Sorry, Young Generation... You Were Out of Bounds**

[https://www.alhadath.ps/article/29797/%D8%B9%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%8B---%D9%83%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%85-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9---%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A\)](https://www.alhadath.ps/article/29797/%D8%B9%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%8B---%D9%83%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%85-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9---%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A)),”

the Palestinian analyst Majid al-’Auri recognized the issue and expressed his regret over the failure of the older Palestinian generation in the Palestinian System to follow the younger generation. Al-’Auri ended his article with the statement “You have lived out of bounds, we did not receive your broadcasts, we live in two different eras, the internet age and the stone age.”

Several years later, al-’Auri’s mea culpa cannot remain a forgotten piece of journalism. The clear signs of distress that Palestinian youth continue to display must act as a wakeup call for Palestinian leadership, Israel, and international community alike. While expressions of this distress have been limited so far, they are likely to intensify over the years, and now is the time to prevent the situation from worsening.

The current situation calls for investments of the foreign funds already funneled to the Palestinian system towards initiatives targeting youth. Such investments should in particular be used to identify employment opportunities and granting preference to youth in work visa applications in Israel or the Arab world, especially in the case of individuals with academic degrees. Funding should also be allocated to professional training programs, particularly in the field of hi-tech, and to initiatives to promote entrepreneurship.

Moreover, both Israel and the Palestinians must look into increasing the familiarity between youth from sides according to the “People to People” model, which espouses bringing both parties closer and deepening their acquaintance with one another. Otherwise, the mutual lack of familiarity between the two groups that will lead both parties in the upcoming decades could have devastating consequences for Israel and for the Palestinians.

Majid al-'Aruri's recognition of the frustration of Palestinian youth, as well as the expressions of the youth generation themselves, must be urgently translated into broad practical efforts by all parties who recognize the importance of the Palestinian system's stability. These parties include not only Palestinians themselves, but also Israel, the Arab world, and the international community. ❖

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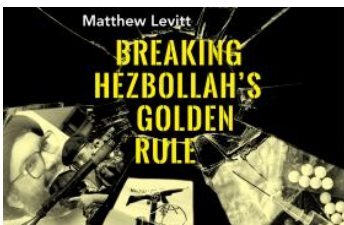
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