



## The Revolt of the Young Palestinian Generation

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**The latest cycle of violence clearly shows the despair young Palestinians feel. This is a generation that will not follow its political leadership blindly. It loathes the existing political frameworks and desires to stand up for itself and see change here and now. It is a generation that wants to live but is frustrated with the reality around it. Senior Fatah politicians have come out against the attacks committed by the youths. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared he would do everything in his power to prevent a third *intifada* and ordered that the security coordination with Israel continue. Yet this has caused outrage among the younger generation that desires a more active struggle against Israel in light of the stagnation in the peace process. The only way to end this cycle of violence is to create hope through a political process that will improve the economic situation in the Palestinian Authority. For their part, the young Palestinians need to find the balance that will allow them to integrate into existing frameworks, to shape their future, and to help the Palestinian national movement out of the dead end situation it is currently in.**

The despair felt by Palestinian youth began to manifest itself in October 2015 in what can be described as an "*intifada* of individuals", or the "*intifada* of knives". This is the culmination of processes that have been bubbling under the surface and finally erupted. Some of the key factors contributing to this round of violence are the failure of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to bring a political process with a promising horizon, negative economic prospects causing despair among the young generation, growing alienation between the political leadership and the people and between the youth and the PA's traditional political institutions. In addition to this, one must consider the highly effective campaign asserting that Al-Qsa is under threat, which has been accompanied by incitement in online films,

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video games, and television programs meant for youngsters and children. These all inflamed the passions of the younger generation, convincing them that their struggle was deeply ingrained in religious values and significance.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict today is transitioning from one that predominantly revolves around nationalism to one that is increasingly of religious characteristics. This trend is evident in the discourse around the "*intifada* of individuals", and especially regarding the Damascus Gate of the old city in Jerusalem (in which many stabbing attacks took place) that has become known amongst the Palestinian youth as "The Gate of the Martyrs." The selection of Israeli victims in this cycle of violence also points to this trend. In addition to attacks on Israelis in uniform (police, military, etc.), which is indicative of youths who are unafraid to attack the all-powerful IDF, what is noteworthy is the number of victims who have a clear Jewish/religious appearance. This is true especially in the attacks that have occurred in Jerusalem.

It is difficult to point to a specific event as the beginning of this cycle of violence. Yet one should remember that in December 2014 Jerusalem experienced a wave of stabbing and car-ramming attacks accompanied by an extensive internet campaign. It is the youth that is setting the tone for this *intifada*, as is evident from social media. It contains elements of sharing and mimicking in the spirit of Facebook: one youngster follows in his friend's footsteps and everything is disseminated virally via the internet in a way that glorifies the acts of terror. This encourages the continuation of the struggle, and goes beyond the memorialization of the attacker.

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This wave of Palestinian violence is an expression of the frustration the young generation is experiencing. Those who expect this *intifada* to include mass demonstrations that end with widespread violent disturbances will be disappointed. Each wave of violence and *intifada* has its own characteristics, which sometimes change as events unfold. The second *intifada* (which erupted in 2000), for example, turned from a mass struggle to a series of battles between armed Palestinians and the IDF.

In the current cycle of violence, the individual is at the center. His or her actions are those of defiance against the current political reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as against the ongoing oppression within the Palestinian political system.

This generation of young Palestinians challenges conventional thinking, and it is difficult to apply to it broad definitions and frameworks. It is a generation that refuses to blindly follow its political leadership and shows disdain for existing political party frameworks. Palestinian youths distance themselves from their teachers, and sometimes their parents as well. It is a generation that wishes to

shape its own future and to see change here and now; a generation yearning to live but frustrated with the present; a generation that does not see itself tied to past events but is also unaware of Israel's military might. Moreover, they often mistakenly misinterpret the IDF's use of advanced weaponry and armed vehicles as Israeli fear, which is amplified via social media. They do not carry memories of the suppression of the second *intifada* or the devastation Israel's tanks left behind. To them, history is not a tool from which they can learn lessons. They are entirely forward looking.

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The PLO's leadership needs to adopt a policy of restraint and to contain the Palestinian youths' rebellion. Alongside the ongoing split between Fatah and Hamas, this is one of the challenges it currently faces. This young generation's rebellion grew during the Palestinian teachers' strike, which took place during February 2016. The strike led to thousands of Palestinian youths and children being absent from any formal education setting at the same time as social media urged them to commit acts of violence. The strike also challenged the PA's legitimacy, a message that has trickled down to the younger generation. The strike ended in March 2016 after an agreement was reached between the PA and the teachers' representatives, which included a 10 percent pay raise and a framework to promote structural reforms within the teachers' union.

Signing the agreement returned order to the Palestinian education system. While it is true that peace education is not commonplace in the PA schools, or in those of UNRWA, the fact that young boys and girls are back in a framework allows the PA to contain them and monitor their behavior in a way that can minimize the potential of their carrying out acts of violence.

While Hamas is trying to fan the flames and is encouraging the making of inciting videos and their dissemination online, senior Fatah politicians came out strongly against the youths' actions. They called on the Palestinian youths to wage instead a "jihad of education" and self-development in order to properly serve the Palestinian national cause and to create the foundation for the Palestinian state. This call was supported by Abbas, who, in interviews to the media, argued that the youths' violent acts contradict the Palestinian national interest.

In an interview to Channel 2's *Uvda* program (31 March 2016), [Abbas said](#) that in one of the schools to which he dispatched the Palestinian security forces, knives were found in the possession of seven boys and girls. On his orders, the security officials spoke to the youths and [explained how dangerous their actions were](#). This was seen by many of the younger generation as unpopular and as an attempt to prevent them from conducting the struggle in the manner that they prefer. Abbas is not afraid to confront the extremism that has spread among the youth. He declared he would do all he can to prevent a third *intifada* and ordered that security coordination with Israel continue.

The youths' dissatisfaction with the elites running the PA is evident in the results of the elections to the Birzeit University Student Union held in April 2016. Support for Fatah dropped as a result of its being in power and its inability to bring about substantial results on the political front. Moreover, the ongoing security coordination with Israel causes significant anger amongst the students who are interested in taking a more active struggle against Israel in light of the stalemate in the political process. Historically, the elections to the university student unions are a litmus test to identify political trends among the younger generation.

Over the last two years Hamas has won consecutive elections at Birzeit and maintained a base of support on campus. A significant percentage of Hamas voters are non-religious individuals who live a modern life and their vote is one of protest in the face of a hopeless reality. Many young Palestinians who graduate and go out into the workforce cannot find employment in line with their expectations. As a result, they challenge the traditional leadership and are unwilling to work within existing frameworks.

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The last cycle of violence challenges those who are attempting to sketch the profile of the potential attacker. Analysis of the events of the last months points to close proximity between the attacks. Often we witnessed a high density of attacks over a few days followed by a lull in the violence. This is not coincidental. The videos that are almost instantaneously disseminated across the internet both glorify the attackers and create the basis for imitators on the other. It is very difficult to prevent an attack by an individual whose attitudes are shaped by new media and does not share his plans with family or friends. The only way to end this cycle of violence is to create hope for the younger generation. This would manifest itself in progress in the peace process with Israel and economic improvement within the PA as a byproduct.

The Palestinian youths are challenging the existing frameworks but they will not be able to accumulate enough political power to affect change without using those same frameworks and institutions. The challenge they face is finding the balance that will allow them to work within the system and shape their future by becoming the generation that makes history by helping the Palestinian national movement out of its current situation. This means promoting internal political unity between existing factions while effectively leading the broader international struggle for Palestinian national self-determination.