COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Upending the Palestinian Leadership: The Role of Youth

By: Fadi Quran · June, 2018

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Instead of bringing an end to the occupation, the current Palestinian leadership and its institutions have become a key component of it. Yet a new generation of leaders is slowly emerging. Their goal is to build a new framework for the Palestinian struggle that avoids the mistakes of the past and ensures that freedom is achieved in their lifetime. Their successful entrance into leadership will require both a reckoning with and breaking of a cycle that blocks change.[1]

Looking at former and current Palestinian leadership, one can observe a cyclical trajectory in which members of the elite first acquire the legitimacy to lead through a combination of traditional structures and foreign support. The legitimacy of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin Al-Husseini, for example, was grounded in religious and familial authority and enhanced and institutionalized by the Ottoman Empire and then the British Mandate. Ahmed Shuqeiri's legitimacy derived from the Arab League as well as his educational status and familial ties, while President Mahmoud Abbas's legitimacy was founded on factional loyalties within Fatah and then significantly consolidated by the US and Israel.

These leaders and the institutions they administer fail to deliver on popular aspirations, leading to stagnation and public dissent. This precipitates an inter-Palestinian power struggle that is often intergenerational and highly destructive. The struggle ends when a national tragedy occurs that either destroys or unites the competing factions. During these historical moments of national chaos, a new generation of leaders rises, mesmerizing the public and accruing revolutionary legitimacy that propels them to the top.

In each turn of this cycle, sitting leaders either adopt the new discourse and coopt members of the new generation or maintain status via intervention by foreign sponsors who kill or arrest insurgents. An example of this dynamic is the death of Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam, and later the leaders of the 1936 Revolt, who were crushed with great brutality by the British. Yasser Arafat's conquest of the PLO from Shuqeiri in the 1960s, in which Arafat incorporated members of the new generation, is another. Such transitions also occurred on the local level during the First Intifada, and with Hamas's gradual takeover in Gaza during and after the Second Intifada.[2]

The third phase of this cycle sees the rise of a technocratic class, a generation of leaders that attempts to rebuild or replace the institutions that were destroyed in the internal conflict. These leaders are or perceive themselves to be institution builders, and although they rarely reach the pinnacles of power, they are able to acquire significant authority. These builders can take many forms in their approach to reinvigorate society, from the revolutionary to the neoliberal. Examples include Khalil Al-Wazir, a key founder of Fatah who was pivotal in slowly rebuilding the national movement in Palestine after the PLO's failures in Lebanon. He was assassinated by Israel in Tunisia for his role in laying the groundwork that launched the First Intifada. Another example is Salam Fayyad, who pursued a Western-backed neoliberal institution-building process in Palestine after the Second Intifada. Regardless of the political leanings of these builders,

their efforts are often short-lived as they tend to clash with more deeply-rooted power structures. This phase of the cycle often closes with a return to the first phase, wherein a small set of elites, supported by outside forces, hold control.

Today, this cycle seems blocked. An ossified Palestinian leadership has managed to cling to power for more than two decades. The institutional framework established by the Oslo Accords – a Palestinian Authority (PA) without authority providing inadequate administrative services, low-level employment, and security for Israel – still governs a subset of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The PA has become a buffer zone between the Palestinians and the Israeli occupation, one that largely favors the occupation. Meanwhile, through heavy foreign assistance, the PA has transformed the socioeconomic landscape of Palestinian society by increasing inequality, widening political divisions, and even attempting to alter the media and educational landscape to weaken all forms of effective struggle against the occupation.

The results of these developments, combined with the deteriorating regional politics of the Middle East, has led the most astute observers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to conclude that the Palestinian struggle for freedom is comatose.

But one need only look a bit deeper to see that something is stirring. A new generation of Palestinians is organizing and growing in strength. They are waiting for the right moment to transform the status quo and create the momentum that will end the occupation. The Israeli security establishment, although it may not fully understand these dynamics, sees this coming. Why else would Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman ban the Palestinian "Youth Movement" and put it on the terrorist list? In fact, there is no organization or organized body called the "Youth Movement" on the ground in Palestine. Rather, the term Al-Hirak Al-Shababi is most commonly used to refer to any social or political action led by youth. What scares Lieberman so? Why does the Palestinian General Intelligence

maintain a file on "youth-led activities?"

Over the past five years I have met and spoken with thousands of young Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in the diaspora. In every town, city, and refugee camp, youth groups are blossoming. Most focus on very local needs and lead volunteer work. They appear non-political and are not affiliated with any faction. These groups often fail, fall apart, and use what they have learned to try something new. Their growth is anything but linear, but their learning is exponential.

These groups' driving questions are: What do we need to do to have a better life? What is our purpose? How do we achieve it? Having asked these questions, it is not long before they discover that the occupation and the PA as its governing body are obstacles in their path. This generation's focus on grassroots action and its ability to conceptualize the PA as an impediment to a genuine liberation movement are fundamental to its potential to transform the stagnant Palestinian leadership model.

Further, many young people in Palestine are despondent about the status quo. This is clearest in Palestinian universities, which have been transformed from beacons of liberation to factories of disenchantment. Once hotbeds of Palestinian political struggle, the universities today produce young men and women focused on two things: a paying job or an opportunity to emigrate. One university dean I spoke with defined his job as simply training a workforce for the PA economy. Although youth groups are active on campuses, offering glimpses of hope, the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and Hamas' forces in Gaza have turned student politics and electioneering into a shadow of what they once were, ensuring that superficial slogans and fear override genuine student organizing and hope.

However, despite these repressive policies, the new generation has not given up on

its Palestinian identity or its dreams of freedom. Many are preparing to enter the struggle for freedom under the right leadership: one they can be part of and trust. This new generation of leaders, learning from the experiences of the past, have wisely chosen to work quietly, away from the spotlight, and patiently prepare for when the moment is ripe.

Identifying that moment, however, will be difficult because three stars need to align: a) Reigniting hope: The Palestinian street needs to go from being risk averse to being hopeful that a better future is possible; b) Overcoming the power threshold: The youth must feel they have the human resources and endurance to slog through the obstacles the PA and Israel can put in their way; c) Consolidating to confront the occupation: Given that the PA and its security apparatus are pivotal in maintaining the status quo, and that any more internal Palestinian strife is to be avoided, the youth will have to find a moment when the occupation has committed an act so severe that they can mobilize many of the ranks of the apparatus into the struggle against the occupation and away from internal repression. Of course, Israel and its backers will do their best to make sure these stars do not align, from killing hope to arresting dozens of youth activists. The only way for this moment to arise is for Palestinian civil society and youth activists to build their strength and expand societal self-awareness.

How will these young people avoid the mistakes of the past and break the cycle outlined above? For a new Palestinian leadership to be successful, a culture of transparency, accountability, and feedback must first be created at the local level. No matter how powerful, resilient, and disciplined a leader is, and no matter how much they love their country and people, they are human. It is only through developing a culture of accountability that a community can produce leaders that can move the struggle forward. While Palestine has had many leaders, none have maintained a culture around them that helped birth new leaders and ensured that they remain accountable. Creating this culture is not something done through

legislation or rules alone, but is a daily practice.

Although there is not enough space here to flesh out the necessary practices in detail, some are fairly straightforward. For example, leaders at all levels of society, from volunteer groups to ministries, can work with their teams to put forward a clear vision for what they want to achieve, define each person's responsibilities and specific outcomes, and ensure that leaders take ownership of their and their teams' results. They should allow team members to provide feedback on the process in an open setting, such as in a weekly meeting when tasks are tallied and learning is discussed in a convivial manner.

In such a process, the group's leader helps ensure that the team achieves its vision in a united, collaborative spirit. Eventually, this ensures that everyone in the group is a leader because leadership is not couched as a zero-sum process.

The process may not always work perfectly, but the lessons learned are valuable, including lessons about how one's ego can get in the way of achieving team goals. Most importantly, the youth participants become aware of a method of teamwork and leadership that transcends what they see in local politics. Though it may sound cliché, it is nonetheless true that nothing is more impactful than leading by example and learning through experimentation.

These self-aware leaders and their culture of transformative leadership will clash with the socioeconomic environment and political elite established and strengthened by international players and Israel. Such a people's-based leadership, whether directly or indirectly, will be the target of massive cooptation and, if that fails, assassination. One can argue that Israel's "mowing the grass" in Gaza and the PA's assault on student and youth politics are preemptively attempting to destroy rising leaders.

While some argue that a top-down approach to reform will fix the leadership problems – by restructuring the PLO, gaining representation, and holding

elections, among other strategies – the current socioeconomic dynamics, reality of occupation, and international intervention in Palestinian politics make these efforts at internal reform easy targets for political manipulation. It is authentic change at the local level that can fix the problem from its roots and bring about a lasting leadership transformation for Palestinian society. If this generation succeeds, it will not only liberate the nation, but will ensure that the future beyond liberation is more beautiful than many of us today can imagine.

1. Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here). To read this piece in French, please click here . Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.
2. While revolutionary phases in Palestinian history failed to achieve liberation, they signal important turning points in the struggle, such as the solidification of anti-colonial discourse after 1936 and the rise of a more independent national movement after Fatah took control of the PLO.

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