

Activism among a new generation of Palestinian exiles

Maher Bitar

Despite their history of protracted and fragmented displacement, we should not mistake Palestinians for vulnerable, powerless and minor actors in their own tragedy.

In contrast to most situations of refugee flight, it is not individual persecution or country circumstances that are the cause of the Palestinians' protracted exile but rather the dissolution and disappearance of an internationally recognised political entity to which Palestinians belong. Despite this, in many ways the Palestinian experience of prolonged displacement has also been a persistent experiment in 'refugee participation', where refugees – as part of a displaced national collective – have for decades actively sought to overcome their disenfranchisement, challenge protection gaps, and have their interests included in political negotiations affecting their futures.

Yet now, more than 60 years after their parents and grandparents became stateless refugees, a new generation of Palestinians is coming of age in a very different political and cultural context and is facing daunting challenges.

Alongside the immediacy of Israeli military occupation and expansionism, and entrenched discrimination and marginalisation experienced in countries of exile, Palestinian youth have begun to mobilise politically in an effort to push back against intensifying pressures arising from three long-standing and exacerbating forces: firstly, the multi-generational dislocation they were born into; secondly, the global fragmentation of their community; and, thirdly, the political vacuum created by the slow disintegration of a Palestinian national movement with global reach.

Palestinians of my generation are coming to re-imagine their potential roles within the Palestinian body politic, both as refugees and as members of the Palestinian people. Emerging responses suggest a culturally and politically astute "reassumption of refugee consciousness"¹, woven into a more

assertive Palestinian nationalism and a gradual shift away from activism based on 'solidarity' – a form of political engagement that effectively sectioned off Palestinians on the 'outside' from those on the 'inside'. Acutely aware of the corrosive effects that protracted displacement, geographic fragmentation and political marginalisation are having on their communities, young Palestinians have begun articulating the need for reformed institutions to step into the void left by the national movement. This has spurred a number of promising transnational political and cultural initiatives that are re-organising and reinvigorating local communities, while also seeking to re-establish links across Palestinian communities around the world.

In the world of art, author Ahdaf Soueif notes that "diaspora Palestinians are constantly activating links with home – and links between different bits of home – forming productive partnerships as part of a wider community of artists." This generation of Palestinian artists represents, according to Soueif, "a whole society in a state of cultural mobilisation, [...] with people from every sector engaging in activities that they define as cultural and as affirming Palestinian identity and resistance."²

There has also been a surge of international political organising among young Palestinians – much of it encouraging but still uncoordinated, under-funded and searching to find its political moorings. For example, the Palestinian Youth Network (PYN)³ has managed to connect Palestinian youth from every continent across geographic – and political – boundaries. At its core, PYN seeks to plug a fundamental gap: Palestinians of this generation do not have a vehicle to facilitate face-to-face contact. We simply do not know who else is out there and how each of us

is responding to the myriad, distinct challenges facing our communities.

Moreover, by representing a diverse array of communities around the world and utilising the latest communication and political organisational tools to their advantage, PYN members embody an unintended, if not paradoxical, consequence of prolonged exile. They are searching for ways to transform their perceived weaknesses – their individual and communal dispossession, statelessness and fragmentation – into collective strengths. Global citizens by default, many are trying, through PYN or other channels, to capitalise on their diverse educational, cultural and political experiences in order to ensure that their voices and demands are heard in their countries of residence, on the world stage and, to varying degrees, among the remnants of what constitutes the Palestinian political leadership.

Political organising centred on achieving concrete national and human rights has become infused with an urgent sense that such activism must seek to preserve and reinvigorate a shared sense of Palestinian identity. Fragmentation and long-standing displacement have exacerbated generational, factional, religious and other divisions that must be transcended. Although an uphill struggle, it reflects what Sayigh aptly describes as a "refusal to be forgotten."

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1. Rosemary Sayigh 'Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries a Quarter of a Century On' in Roger Heacock (ed) *Temps et espaces en Palestine*, Beirut, Institut Français du Proche-Orient (Études contemporaines, no25). 2008. <http://ifpo.revues.org/index495.html>

2. Ahdaf Soueif 'Reflect and Resist' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jun/13/art-theatre>

3. <http://www.pal-youth.org>