

**Networks of Great Expectations**  
**Palestinian Youth Activism in the Internet Age**

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**Abstract**

Networks of Great Expectations - Palestinian Youth Activism in the Internet Age

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For more than a decade now, a growing variety of protests, mobilizations and movements have been initiated through the Internet. Particularly from 2011 and onwards, a rapid and global expansion of such movements has generated a growing scholarly debate on the role of digital activism for new social movements across various political contexts. My research engages this debate by examining a series of Palestinian protests that took place in the period of 2011-2013.

This dissertation explores the relationship between digital networks (especially social media platforms) and new youth movements within a Palestinian context marked by territorial fragmentation, Israel's ongoing military occupation and internal Palestinian political divisions in the West Bank and Gaza. In this study, I present an in-depth analysis of three case studies in the Occupied Palestinian territories and inside Israel, based on extensive qualitative field research, and complemented by a broad online survey of Palestinian youth's patterns of online engagement. Through this analysis, I shed light on the formation, dynamics and values of a series of Palestinian protests and the prospects for social change, in a post-Arab Spring context.

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Taking the Arab Uprisings of 2011 as a point of reference in the changing mobilization processes in the region, I take issue with a prevalent scholarly approach that analyzed these newer movements through the lenses of their links with formally organized activist groups and traditional social movements. By focusing on the intersection between online activities and offline Palestinian contexts, I explain why these young activists preferred loose networks of mobilization, how did their protests take off, and under what conditions they eventually succeeded.

The sudden surge of a sustained wave of protests and the tenacious rise of a new group of actors and their new forms of organizing happened at a time when youth studies and polling centers had emphasized just the opposite: the exit of young Palestinians from politics. With this central paradox as a backdrop, the analysis in this dissertation centers around three key areas: 1- the conditions that determined the transformation of certain actions initiated on digital networks into street protests; 2- the degree to which social media, online networks and new forms of activism in this digital age affected more traditional mobilization modes, especially those implemented by official Palestinian parties, and more conventional party affiliated youth organizations in each geographic area; and, 3- the long-term impact of these youth groups and their newer mobilization modes within their society, and relations with existing grassroots movements within the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

This study revealed the impact of these protests on the political consciousness of a network of activists directly involved in these movements. It also exposed the significant weakening of the capacity of official parties and formal movements to draw on these newer forms of mobilizations. I argue that the online campaigns and offline protests

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signal the laying of the groundwork for a new and networked Palestinian social movement, developing outside the structures of official parties and formal political organizations. Particularly within a Palestinian context marked by segregation walls, military checkpoints, and internal political intimidation, social media tools and increased social media literacy among Palestinian youths enabled this collection of protest movements to move, after the Second Intifada, from the margins of the Palestinian society to its center.

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At the time of writing this, I feel like someone who has just reached the finish line of a long and solitary marathon. Like many long-distance runs, the moment you cross the finish line feels far from celebratory: You don't look that pretty, but rather immensely exhausted. Every muscle of your red face is tense as you try to smile; every muscle and tendon in your body aches as you try to resume your normal stride, and your chest feels heavy when you try to relax your breathing. Chances are high that you probably sustained an injury along way, so you go home and treat yourself with ice and/or heat packs and a good amount of water and Tylenol. Then you rest, and the healing begins.

Like a marathon, the path leading up to this PhD, tested every muscle and fiber of my intellectual endurance, linguistic capacity and inner strength. At the end of this race, however, I realized that the feeling of being alone while pushing forward is deceptive. While parts of the journey were excruciating and lonely, in the end when you cross the finish line, you realize that you have never actually been alone. To the contrary, you have had an incredible team of people supporting you every step of the race, in so many different ways. I want to acknowledge my deep gratitude and thanks to many of them for their support while I labored through this dissertation.

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time I needed help. Without her selfless commitment and her gift of finding peace and balance while withstanding incredible life transitions, I would not be the woman I am today. My Dad has taught me persistence and determination by urging me to always complete every project I started, big or small, to the best of my ability. Thanks to his example, I learned to see obstacles as temporary and failures as humbling lessons in courage and humility. Thank you with all my heart, Mom and Dad - as much as this PhD has been my journey, it is also a testament of your strength and great example through your own life journey.

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East Jerusalem

May 2017

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

No one saw their protests coming. Nobody warned them how rocky and messy it would get once they plunged from the safety of their digital networks into the streets of Gaza, the West Bank and even inside of Israel. Despite the rapid diffusion of the inspiring images of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, in a fast-moving world networked by the Internet, Palestinian expectations of any form of massive youth revolts seemed depressingly low. One way or another, their odds to come together and protest were close to none.

Overwhelmingly, in this period, the “Oslo generation” - young Palestinians born around the historical period of the Oslo Accords of 1993, appeared depoliticized, demobilized, fragmented, politically alienated and economically marginalized (Sayre & Botmeh 2010; Dhillon & Yousef, 2011; Khalaf & Khalaf, 2011; Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Dana, 2015; Casati 2016). Consistently, these studies highlighted the cynicism, despair and hopelessness of these young Palestinians, locked in their segregated geographic areas, trapped between Israel’s military occupying regime and the deepening division between Palestinian factions in the West Bank and Gaza. Endless and ominous studies and surveys conducted between 2009 and 2013 pointed to the gloomy prospects of a disillusioned youth, whose emotional bond with their traditional leaders was dissipated, replaced instead with a bitter sense of betrayal by their authoritarian parties and formal political movements (Sharek, 2009, 2011, 2013; Al Shabaka, 2011; FAFO 2011; 2013; AWRAD 2013; 2016).

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Notwithstanding this bleak political background and loads of insuperable contextual constraints, a rising tide of Palestinian youth-led activism and protests surged in the Palestinian Territories and inside Israel between 2011 and 2013. It first started on their social media networks, where groups of young Palestinians, inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, shared their own great expectations online. They called on their peers to join them in their Palestinian revolution against the division of the two main Palestinian political parties, Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

On March 15, 2011, in various sites in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and even inside Israel, young Palestinians took to the streets with a core demand, never embraced so publicly before, by vast numbers of youth: “The people want the end of the division,” referring to the political division of the West Bank, ruled by Fatah, and the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas. From there, a sustained series of seemingly isolated protests followed: In November 2011, young activists of the West Bank were the coordinators of another successful campaign, “Palestinian Freedom Rides”, whose images were instantly diffused via the Internet across global networks, exposing the expansion of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the military checkpoints that prevent West Bank Palestinians from crossing into Jerusalem.

In September 2012, a growing network of activists coordinated massive protests in Ramallah, Hebron and Nablus against PA (Palestinian Authority) economic policies. Images of Palestinian Security forces violently beating and cracking down on activists went viral. In January 2013, the initiative of Bab al Shams (Gate of the Sun), where young Palestinians erected tents and caravans, simulating a Palestinian settlement on Israeli occupied land, caught the Israeli authorities by surprise. It took them three days to

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dismantle the tents and arrest the activists, but by that time this activity was hailed as the most creative youth initiative seen in the past decade.

Lastly, in June-July 2013, thousands of young Palestinian Israeli citizens inside Israel, waving Palestinian Flags and wearing checkered black and white *keffiyeh*, rose up to protest Israel's government plan to remove about 40,000 Bedouins from their lands in the Negev Desert. Through coordination via digital networks, solidarity protests were simultaneously organized in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Similarly, brutal images of Israeli police cracking down on activists were posted instantly and shared through social media pages of the activists present in these demonstrations.

Against a predominantly dark narrative of Palestinian Youth activism in the past decade, such a persistent wave of youth protests and new forms of activism are quite striking. Even more remarkable is the fact that these politically unaffiliated activists were willingly exposed to tear-gas, rubber coated bullets, skunk water, severe beating and imprisonment in both Israeli and Palestinian jails. In this dissertation, I aim to explain this paradox of supposedly depoliticized, distressed and demobilized Palestinian youth rising up in mobilization. My central question is: In the face of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles and to the detriment of their own personal safety, why and how did these young groups come together to effect change in their lives, as is evident in a sustained chain of protests?

This dissertation will address this question, through a bottom-up analysis of the online and offline evolution of a series of Palestinian youth protests, led by leaderless and independent Palestinian youth groups between 2011-2013 in Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel. These mobilizations began primarily on digital networks, and then

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materialized into street protests. They were led by masses of youth unaffiliated with established political parties and distrustful of their current leadership. I initially focused on such movements, because despite their similarity and their occurrence in tandem with other protest movements in the Middle East at the time, they barely left a mark on the ongoing narrative of the turbulent period widely known as the “Arab Spring.”

However, when moving beyond the online content analysis of this collection of protests between 2011-2013, and tracing the offline involvement in their separated geographic areas in the Palestinian Territories, my attention quickly shifted beyond the context of the Arab Spring where these movements originated. My attention was drawn to the fascinating and courageous stories of the activists involved in these protests, their new forms of activism initiated on their digital networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, and the formational dynamics of the Palestinian youth movements in the age of the Internet.

By “formational dynamics” I mean a detailed account of the online and offline actions of these activists and their evolving experiences from the digital networks where they first expressed dissent, to the offline challenges of street protests where they demanded change. From creating small groups and opening their Facebook group pages, to the struggle to agree on one common demand, to protesting in the street with thousands of young Palestinians, and then breaking up their groups again. Such stories of online and offline activism appear unconnected on the surface, but when studied, result intertwined in a myriad of unexpected ways. Together they give us a glimpse of the complex realities of the everyday political organizing of these youth groups in the age of the Internet.

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To examine these formational dynamics, I was guided by three analytical questions: 1. What internal and external factors determined the transformation of certain actions initiated on digital networks into street protests led by these youth groups in Palestine? 2. To what degree did these youth networks and their newer forms of activism affect the more traditional mobilization modes, as implemented by official parties and conventional organizations in each separate geographic area? 3. What prevented these activists from moving beyond specific events and initiatives, and developing a sense of a common purpose and shared commitment in order to affect longer-term political change? To answer these questions, I focus on the interplay between the personal life stories of these individual activists, their digital networks that connected them across territorial fragmentations and military borders, and the contentious political realities that shaped their mobilization processes and influenced the evolution of these protests in Gaza, the West Bank and Haifa, Israel.

I argue that these seemingly isolated online campaigns and offline protests are emerging signs of a new and networked Palestinian social movement, developing outside the structures of official parties and formal political organizations. This movement consists of repeated cycles of confrontations with both the current political systems in the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian Territories. A growing network of activities directly involved in these actions ties these protests together. The mobilizing modes of this network of activists indicate a nascent pattern defining their networked movement. One common trait is a profound rupture between these youth groups and conventional organizations, including party memberships, youth organizations or party led demonstrations. These conventional organizations relied

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heavily on top-down modes of mobilization, while the young Palestinians preferred loosely coordinated actions facilitated primarily online away from formal Palestinian actors.

This rupture became publicly visible in the aftermath of the 15 March movement, where young independent Palestinians rose against the ongoing bitter political rivalry between the two main Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas. In response, both Parties used similar tactics to infiltrate, coopt and arrest these youth crowds, demonstrating the common repressive nature of both political systems in the West Bank and Gaza.

Another common theme of this movement is a search for a renewed strategy of popular resistance against the Israeli Occupation, which seeks to rebuild community trust and empower leaders of a variety of forms or movements on the ground, as opposed to the traditional leaders sitting in their offices.

In their search for an alternative path of freedom, justice and dignity, these activists have abandoned the grand formal strategy for national liberation as represented by their Parties, and replaced it instead with intentionally quick and abrupt cycles of protests, aimed at disrupting both Israel's military control and challenging Palestinian repressive elites. This dramatic shift in the targets of their protests is tied into the influence of the Arab Spring in the political aspirations of these young activists. The way young Arabs rose against their corrupt institutions and authoritarian regimes, demanding political change, left a deep impression in the young Palestinians' hearts and minds. For the first time in the rich history of Palestinian youth activism, young Palestinians publicly rebelled against their own political factions. By turning against their divided

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leadership, while simultaneously resisting Israel's occupation, they introduced the notion that the Palestinian struggle must be waged on two parallel fronts: internal and external.

My second argument is that despite Palestinians' everyday experience marked by territorial fragmentation, military borders, and internal political divisions, social media played a crucial role in allowing youth to overcome these obstacles and organize these impressive youth mobilizations across borders. They were able to share content and information about their actions instantly and raise awareness about their protests through their ties with global networks of action. Through their digital networks, they were able to expand, maintain, and strengthen ties across borders and lines of division in Israel and Palestine.

It is true that, to date, most of these forms of actions have been contained, and have not managed to change the internal political systems of the parties, nor have they altered the broader dynamics of Palestinian politics or the Palestinian Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, despite their failure to visibly affect the broader dynamics of these politics, my findings lead me to believe that this series of youth led protests marks just the onset of an independent and effective network of activists, increasingly aware of their power to organize outside of their controlling structures. As a result, a growing and experienced pool of leaders may be able to transfer their successful examples and experiences from these waves of protest from their informal youth networks, to larger and more visible networks of actions, such as the Popular Resistance Committees and the BDS (Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions) movement.

### **In search of a theory**

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Far from clear and linear, my initial quest for a theoretical framework in which to ground the overall rationale for my study was elusive and volatile –to say the least.

Ultimately, this uncertain quest influenced my choices of the literature that this dissertation draws on.

My academic interests regarding new social movements and new forms of youth activism in the era of the Internet emerged in the context of my previous work career in the international development field in the Middle East, between 2003-2010. During this period, and through my work as a youth mobilizer for an international humanitarian organization (Mercy Corps), I was exposed to a series of dramatic developments, such as the Iraq War, in 2003, where I lived and worked for 18 months with groups of Iraqi and Kurdish youth in Southern and Northern Iraq. Another was the start of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah (Lebanon) war.

At that time, between 2005 and 2006, I lived in Beirut, working with Lebanese youth in Beirut and Southern Lebanon, just across the border with Israel. My next assignment with Mercy Corps took me to Israel and Palestine, between 2006 and 2010, where I lived in East Jerusalem and worked in Gaza and the West Bank. A series of events took place there as well: the shocking electoral victory of the Islamic Resistance Movement of Palestine (known as Hamas) in 2006, a civil war leading to the factional split in 2007, the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza war, and others.

It was interesting to read about these events that received the lion's share of media coverage and extensive scholarly analysis, while observing them happening in real time. I could not help but wonder where my own personal experiences, working directly with groups of Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian youth, fitted in. In other words, how did these

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grueling political events, largely analyzed as organized efforts of Parties, organizations and governments, affect the lives of the young people who actually endured the day-to-day grind of the events? There were times, when just leaving my office to conduct community project visits, it felt like crossing two very different worlds: On one side, government officials, international policy makers, Middle East analysts and NGO experts spoke of war and peace, local corruption and global terrorism, political crises and opportunities. On that basis they drew broad goals and strategies, primarily executed through projects I helped to implement.

On the other side, on my way to implement these projects a quite different reality unfolded in front of me, hard to fit along with neat project goals and clear strategic vision. This reality, full of twists and turns, prompted by people living their day to day lives, assessing their needs, making their decisions and unfolding life experiences seemed to me like another world, quite detached from the world of political pundits, policy experts and NGO professionals.

Although, at the time, such observations were primarily intuitive, I felt strongly that the perspectives of these young people I was interacting with daily was often missing in these media and regional experts accounts. This was one observation from my work experience that made me question the narratives on the overwhelming power of political elites, parties and other similar formal organizations, in the day-to-day decisions of these young people I met. The more I felt a gap between the language of goals and issues as identified by donors and regional experts, and that of social and political realities of the people I was meeting with, the more I developed a tendency to question the former and listen more to the latter. This quest pushed me in my own research more towards a

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grassroots perspective, trying to make sense of the decisions of these young people as less informed by their Parties political or ideological agendas, and more tied into their every day politics of community life and organizing.

Shortly after I left the West Bank and Gaza in 2010, another development occurred: the much-publicized Arab Spring. Unlike previous events, established movements, official Parties, or other legitimate organizations on the ground did not launch this sudden explosion of massive popular movements. Despite overwhelming conclusions drawn by some Middle East experts and some state and society scholars that democratic mobilizations were impossible in the Middle East, individuals and youth groups with no links with established parties and formal organizations proved them wrong. They surprised everyone by calling for a revolution, nowhere else, but on Facebook.

In fact, no other political juncture like the Arab Uprisings of 2011 was defined so much by the novelty of the technologies of communication, indicating a contagious optimism about their democratizing potential in the political systems of the region. I had seen and experienced in person the initial enthusiasm about the Internet and the window to the world it creates, the passion of young Palestinians for personal electronics, such as laptops and mobile phones, and their increasing daily communication on social network platforms. There was something new and exciting in their day-to-day lives, and it appeared to have nothing to do with parties or politics, but with technology, popular culture and free online sites for personal expression.

In the years following the Arab Spring, I entered graduate school at the University of Washington and started exploring in depth my initial dilemmas about the “missing

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everydayness” of the lives of young people I worked with. Simultaneously, I continued to be intrigued and passionate about this new and exciting discovery in the lives of the Arab Millennial generation<sup>1</sup> and the impact of the Internet and digital networks on their communication patterns, ideas and actions.

The reason for mentioning these work experiences in the region here is to explain how and why, with the hindsight of time, I strove to find an analytical framework in my own study that sought to embed the online and offline ideas and actions of some of these young individuals, in the realities of their day-to-day lives, personal stories and contextual complexities of their own communities.

### **Social movements in the Internet age**

“Castells and the Media” (Howard 2011) served as my initial theoretical springboard to the accounts of digital networks and new protest movements in the digital age (Castells 1996, 2009, 2012, 2015; Mason 2012; Juris, 2008, 2012; Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba, 2012; Postill, 2013; Bennett& Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Chadwick 2013).

Collectively, these authors highlight the significance of digital networks in these movements, associating them with faster political mobilization, accelerated cycles of protests and new forms of collectivity.

Manuel Castells’s important work in communication is perhaps the most referred to by communication scholars, with regards to his concept of the network society as the new social structure of the 21- century. In his influential book, “Communication Power” (2009), he concludes that a fundamental implication of network society has been the way

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<sup>1</sup> The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is changing the Middle East (Cole, 2014).

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in which politics is leaving the sphere of formal institutions, moving away from rigid hierarchical structures and strong charismatic leaders, toward the alliances by the multitudes in the network society. Through a sweeping array of protest movements across diverse political contexts, and culminating in the events of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, Castells argued that these movements represent the new social movements of the network society (Castells, 2015, pp.3).

This global explosion of revolts (Mason, 2012, pp.43) increasingly starting on digital networks exposed the undercurrents of an ongoing scholarly debate among the communication and social movement scholars (Bimber, B., Flanagan, A. J., & Stohl, C. 2005, 2006; Hardt & Negri, 2005 Langman 2005; Tilly, 2006; Shirky 2008; Bauerlein 2011; Earl & Import 2011; Bennet & Segerberg 2013; Diani & Della Porta, 2013). At the core of this debate, lay a very intriguing, yet still contested, theoretical question: could older theories about collective action and social movements still explain these newer forms of protests?

Bennett & Segerberg (2012, 2013), contributing significantly to an emerging literature on a general theory of such movements, argued that social media platforms offer a new logic of “connective” action, distinct from the logic of Collective Action. This distinction, they argued, derived from the personalized nature of the communication technologies. Social media platforms, these scholars maintained, were not merely technological tools that accelerated these protests, but organizing *agents* that enabled them.

In addition, and drawing mostly from anti-globalization protests in the US or UK (Seattle protests in 1999; the WTO global activities, Occupy Wall Street Movement, Put

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People First Campaign, and We Are The 99%), Bennett (2012), Diani & Della Porta (2013) and others, identified neo-liberal globalization as a structural condition, shaping the emergence of these newer mobilizations against global poverty, rising inequality and global warming (Bennett 1998; Beck 2006; Giddens 1991; Castells, 1996, Benkler, 2006; Langman, 2005).

In my opinion, this group of scholars, and particularly Castells and Bennett, capture accurately the significance of these digital networks for these new forms of protests. Although their individual approaches may diverge on the degree to which these digital networks and online activism has altered the fundamental conditions of politics, analytically, their works concur when they point to the strained explanatory capacity of the older movement theories to explain these contemporary movements. Seen combined, this emerging body of literature represents a significant scholarly search for a new theory that seeks to explain this array of mobilizations as the new social movements of the digital age.

This emerging literature on global networked social movements led by Castells is central in my study. Its relevance became crucial, particularly when I started noticing an analytical trend in a handful of existing studies of these newer Palestinian protests at the wake of the Arab Spring (Hilal, 2010; Al Shabaka, 2011; Christophersen, Hoigilt, & Tiltnes, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015, Burton, 2017). As I will demonstrate later, this trend consisted of insulating these protests from the unfolding regional events in 2011, and examining them primarily in the Palestinian historical context of collective youth mobilization against Israel's occupation. When studied through the lenses of the First

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and Second Intifada (1987 and 2000), the online and offline mobilizations patterns of the activists that led the protest movements of 2011 appeared as rather erratic, short-lived and inconsequential. Also, in sharp contrast with the characterization of the generation Intifada presented as heroic, unified, patriotic and highly politicized, the general labels of the Oslo generation that led these protest movements are “cynical”, “depoliticized” and “demobilized” (Sayre & Botmeh 2010; Dhillon & Yousef, 2011; Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Dana, 2015; Casati 2016).

Such an emphasis on the youth mobilization modes and collective action in these historic Palestinian popular movements left unexplored the emerging Palestinian mobilizing trends in their contemporary context of social movements in the Internet age. Mindful of such analytical pitfalls, Earl & Kimport warned in their study “Digitally Enabled Social change”: “We will have to think of ourselves as scholars of protest rather than as scholars of social movements” (Earl and Kimport, 2012, p. 186).

Some of the characteristics of the Palestinian younger generation, their online tactics and offline protests, were remarkably similar to their global peers and their protest movements: determined to remain unaffiliated with any political party; their decentralized and leaderless networks of action; their reliance on social media platforms as their primary coordinating and communicating tools; and the “occupation” of the public streets and main squares as their sites of protest (Bennett, 2008; Bennet & Segerberg, 2011, 2013, Castells 2015 ).

I am not suggesting here that the analysis of these Palestinian Protests of 2011 should be done without considering the particular conditions that enabled the types of

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networks but that the former (mobilization modes within a Palestinian context) should not be omitted at the expense of the second (global expansion of similar revolts and changing mobilization processes in this digital age). For this reason, I think that positioning these protests in their own regional context, and considering the effect that the massive Arab Uprisings of 2011 had on these Palestinian protest movements is important.

Taking this into account, I will engage with a substantial literature on the events of the Arab Spring as a point of reference in the changing mobilizing processes in the region. First, because the Palestinian organizers of similar protests movements in Gaza, West Bank and Haifa refer to it unanimously as a foundational moment in their consciousness and in their experience as activists. Second, because the new demands and new forms of activism as present in the Arab Spring had an unexpected influence in the Palestinian demands of 2011. Finally, while no other movement in this digital age has received as much analytical attention as the Arab Spring, (Lynch, 2007; 2012; Howard, 2010; Howard & Hussain 2013; Diamond & Plattner 2012; Ghonim, 2012, Gelvin, 2012; Cole 2014; Khatib & Lust 2014), the Palestinian protests of such a period barely left a mark in the substantial scholarship about these historic events fading instead in the background of the cascade of the popular movements in the region.

### **The rise and fall of the Arab Spring**

From a startling series of unprecedented revolutions, to a now well chronicled historical event, the Arab Spring is embodied in the story and the iconic picture of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit-seller who set himself ablaze in front of a local police station and sparked an unprecedented wave of social movements across the region

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(Lynch, 2007, 2012; Howard, 2010; Mason, 2012; Howard & Hussain 2013; Diamond & Plattner 2012; Ghonim, 2012, Gelvin, 2012; Khatib and Lust 2014). Underneath this unifying image of a single powerless hero pitted against the power of the authoritarian state, two contradictory narratives emerged. Central to this contradiction was the role of the existing political structures, versus the role of the new communications technologies in the start and evolution of the Arab Spring events. Bringing both the advantages and disadvantages of the social media activism in the Arab Uprisings into the analysis of the Palestinian protests helps us recognize some current limitations that the literature offers.

One narrative reflected the initial enthusiasm about the new technologies and democratization in the region (Lynch 2007, 2011; Howard, 2009; 2011; Lim, 2012; Diamond & Plattner 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Howard & Hussain 2013; Halverson, Ruston & Trethewey, 2013). It argued that the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies eroded the highly centralized and hierarchical structures of communication, and empowered the previously weak civil society in the region. Diamond and Plattner called it “liberation technology” (Diamond & M.F Plattner 2012, pg. XI). Describing the Arab Spring as a “A single coherent narrative of regional rage” (Lynch, 2012 pp 13); and “intensely unified political space” (Lynch 2012, pg.125), the prevalent scholarly conclusions suggested a radical transformation of the Arab political space, and a unified Arab public as a result of the rise of the new digital technologies (Lynch 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013).

Media and society scholars in the Middle East questioned several aspects of this discourse. Khaled Rinnawi, far from presenting a unified Arab public, defined the new

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situation created by the Internet in the Arab World as “schizophrenic<sup>2</sup>” (Arab Media, p.123). Noha Mellor disagreed with the assumption that there is such a thing as a “unified Arab public”, stressing the heterogeneity of the national experiences of different Arab peoples (Mellor 2011).

Looking beyond these highly unitary or highly fragmentary aspects of the Liberation Technology discourse, I agree in principle with this group of scholars and their attempts to include the argument that digital media - mobile phones, personal computers, and social media are part of the causal story we must tell about the Arab Spring (Howard& Hussain 2013, pp.9). Although it may appear as contradictory, I also think that the fundamental problem with this argument, and the Liberation technology discourse generally, lays with its primary emphasis on digital media at the expense of the ways it interacted with the social contexts in which these mobilization processes arouse. Too much analysis on the online organizing tactics of these activists led to a disconnection from their offline evolution of their mobilizing dynamics. In short, the Liberation Technology approach fell short of explaining the complex ways in which the new digital tools and online networks resonated with the activists in their particular social contexts. In addressing this particular gap in my study, I go beyond an online content analysis, as enabled by the new tools and digital networks, to shed light on the off-line mobilization and stories of involvement of the Palestinian activists that used them.

In sharp opposition to the “Liberation Technology” discourse, some leading experts and scholars in Middle Eastern studies brushed off the theories emphasizing the

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<sup>2</sup> With this term Rinnawi refers to the ambivalent ways in which the government both enhance and restraint the use of internet in their countries.(Arab Media, 2011)

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role of new media in the events of the Arab Spring as “Technology Myths” (Ajami, 2012, January 12; Gelvin, 2012, pg.66). Instead, they sought to demystify the Arab Spring by rooting the latest uprisings in local and regional structural factors: economic grievances, diverse social dynamics as legacies of these particular countries’ encounters with modern Europe; as well as the weakness and resilience factors in the various Middle Eastern autocracies (Mellor 2006, 2011; Gelvin 2012; Council on Foreign Relations 2011; Brynen, R. 2012). Ironically, too much focus on the existing structural order of social, political and state-society relations in the region led this group of authors to insulate the events of the Arab Spring from an ongoing global expansion of similar revolts across very different political and economic contexts. Such an approach underestimated the ongoing transformation of involvement in social movements, as well as the newer forms of political activities in the digital age, even in authoritarian regimes of the Middle East.

For example, in his book “The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know”, Gelvin ranked the two most widely shared media beliefs about the Arab Spring: 1. It was a Facebook revolution, 2. It was a youth revolution, as the top two out of 10 myths about the Egyptian uprisings (Gelvin, 2012, pp. 66). As a “Cyber Skeptic”<sup>3</sup>, Gelvin saw the social media as mere tools that facilitated communication among the “real activists” and would-be participants” (Gelvin, pp.52). I was particularly struck by how Gelvin differentiates between the protesters as “real activists”- those who belonged to organized movements, and “would-be activists”- those who mobilized primarily through their

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<sup>3</sup> According to this camp of scholars, attributing the uprisings to social media transforms the true heroes of uprisings –the participants- from protagonists into patsies who act not because they choose to but because they are somehow technologically compelled to do so. (Gelvin 2012)

online social networks.<sup>4</sup>

I think that by simplifying the role of the technologies as merely facilitating communication, Gelvin may have underestimated some important characteristics of the new technologies of communication mentioned earlier in this section: horizontal communication instead of a hierarchical flow of information; individuals being both consumers and producers of information; flexible ad-hoc networks that scale up and dissolve instantly (Castells 2009; Howard 2010). I also believe that by drawing a rather hard line between “real participants” (Gelvin, 2012, pp.66) and “would be participants” (Gelvin, 2012, pp.66), this approach may lose sight of new groups of actors, such as the politically and ideologically unaffiliated youth who choose to initiate and coordinate their actions online, via their digital networks.

In another study, “Taking to the Streets” (2014), Khatib and Lust take a similar approach with that of Gelvin. While they do recognize some newer forms of political activities in the Internet age, (Wael Ghonim’s Facebook page, the Ultra’s club in Egypt, the 20 February movement in Morocco), they do so primarily to problematize the mobilizing structures of these newer movements by emphasizing their lack of roots in the formal existing movements on the ground.

The youth groups that triggered these rebellious episodes have not been able to ripen the dividends of their success. Ironically, the reason for this is their preference for largely loose and networked movements (Khatib & Lust, 2014 Pg.67).

This quote serves as an illustration of a generalized consensus in the conclusions of social movement scholars with regard to the youth mobilizations during the Arab

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Spring: If they do not find connections between these loose and leaderless networks with the existing social movement organizations, or powerful institutionalized actors, they tend to question the relevance of these young activists, as well as their ability to generate sustained mobilization on the ground (Beinin & Vairel 2011; Khatib and Lust 2014; Herrera 2014).

I first want to note here that there is no question about the significance of these scholarly remarks which weigh these newer forms of protest against long-term structural forces and their relevance in facilitating longer-term political action. Viewed through these lenses, the youth movements that I study have yet to prove their long-term value in affecting longer-term political change, or impacting the larger political field of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, it is also fair to say that when these scholars highlight the missing connections of these newly mobilized youth with the existing social movement organizations on the ground, they also imply that these formal organizations on the ground were the true Arab uprisings' source, thus leaving unexamined a myriad of other forms of connections that these youth groups had secured via their digital networks, and that ultimately triggered these events.

My overall critique to these two dominant discourses regarding the Arab Spring mobilizations is the following: one, the Liberation technology discourse emphasized too much the role of the new technologies of communication at the expense of the social and political realities in the region. The other however, the "Technology Myth of the Arab Spring", examines the newer forms of protests in the age of the Internet, primarily through their relationship with organized formal activism on the ground, almost insulating them as unique to the region of the Middle East. In my dissertation I will

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address some of these mutually exclusive aspects of these two discourses by examining the dynamics of the Palestinian protests in the intersection between their particular contexts in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, and the digital networks of action facilitated primarily by social media.

My objective, in doing that, is to include the Palestinian youth movements of 2011 in the debate on global networked movements and to contribute to the broader understanding of these new movements. I will do that by embedding the actions and protests of the Palestinian activists, in their own particular context of Palestinian Authoritarianism and Israeli Occupation, while theoretically aligning their actions and protests with similar protest movements across the globe.

### **Defining concepts of youth and youth activism in the Palestinian context.**

Considering that the Arab revolutions of 2011 were equated with the unprecedented political mobilization of young people (Abed, 2012; Bayat, 2010, 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Bayat & Herrera, 2010, 2012); Mulderig 2013; Cole, 2014; Herrera, 2014; Lust and Khatib, 2014), it seems analytically meaningful in this study to define concepts of Palestinian youth and youth movements in this important time period.

It is important to note here that an in-depth theoretical discussion of youth, as a social construct and category of analysis, is not within the scope of this dissertation. Given the existence of a substantial and a well-researched body of work that has already generated important insights on such a topic (Hamilton, 1989, 2003; Wyn & White 1997; Sherrod Torney, Purta & Flanagan 2010), my goal here is to apply these insights while trying to best align the terms of youth and their movements with the objectives of this study.

While the dominant terms in the discourses on youth and political activism in the wake of the Arab Uprisings were the “youth bulge” or “youthfulness” of the Arab population (Sayreh & Botmeh 2010; Navtej and Yousuf, 2009; Khalaf & Khalaf, 2011; Abed, 2012; Mulderig 2013), the general scholarly consensus is now that these concepts fell short of thoroughly explaining the sudden surge of youth mobilizations in the Arab Spring (Ghonim, 2012; Cole, 2014; Herrera, 2014; Lust and Khatib, 2014).

A group of scholars looked at the role of the new technologies as a socializing agent for the youth of the Middle East (Bayat & Herrera, 2010, 2012; Bayat, 2010, 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Herrera, 2014, Cole 2014) by engaging with a body of literature on generations, dating to the late 90s, which affirmed how generational change and technological change are perceived as intrinsically connected in this digital age. In their study, “Wired Citizenship” (2014), Herrera argued that it is valid to conceptualize youth in the Middle East as a generational cohort that carries features of a wired generation. This term, according to these authors, captures how communication behavior in this high-tech era leads to a re-wiring of users, which changes their relationship to political and social systems, and their notion of themselves as citizens.

Members of these cohorts, born between the late 70s and the early years of the millennium, function in ways that are more horizontal, interactive, participatory, open, collaborative and mutually influential (Herrera, *Wired Citizenship*, pp.20). In their study “Being Young and Muslim” (2010), Bayat and Herrera concluded that although far from being homogeneous, Arab youth, with its high susceptibility to intergenerational conflicts, acceptance of human rights, and demands for political inclusion, actually may not be that different from their contemporary youth in other parts of the world (Bayat &

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Herrera 2012)). I situate the concepts of Palestinian youth in these analytical insights on the critical role of the new technologies as a socializing agent for youth in the Middle East.

The fact that Palestinian youth is part of this wired generation is evident in the annual rate of increase for Facebook and Twitter users in Palestine in 2012-2013, the highest rate amongst all Arab countries, an astonishing 232% (Spark, 2013). At the time of writing, according to a report published in 2016 by Hamleh - Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, the overall number of Palestinians (in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel) on Facebook, reaches almost 2,586,400 users, of which 1,780,000 are Palestinians living in the '67 areas, 170,000 are Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, and 486,000 are Palestinians living in the '48 areas.<sup>5</sup>

The term "'67' areas is used by Palestinians to refer to the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, captured by Israel in 1967, the year that marks the Arab Israeli war known as The Six-Day War. Between June 5 and June 10, 1967, Israel fought and won against Egypt, Jordan and Syria and occupied land in these neighboring Arab countries.<sup>6</sup> The term "'48' areas is used by Palestinians to refer to the territories where Palestinians lived before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The year is recognized in the national history of the Palestinians as "Al-Nakbah", the catastrophe, referring to the defeat of the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1947-1949, and the mass exodus of

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<sup>5</sup> Qawasmi & Othman (2016). For more data on this topic, see "# Palestine: Palestinian Social Media Activity during 2015". Retrieved from <http://www.7amleh.org/en/article/62>

<sup>6</sup> During this same war, Israel also captured the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt; the Shebaa farms from Lebanon; the Golan Heights from Syria; and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan.

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Palestinians from those areas that now make present day Israel. In separate chapters, I include more detailed context around these defining events in the broader contexts of the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, activists that I interviewed were born between 1987 and 1995. It was the “Oslo” accords (1993) and the political frameworks that came afterwards that informed the historical context in which this generation came of age. For this reason, when referring to the involvement of the young Palestinians, in the movements of 2011-2013, I often employ a widely used term “Oslo Generation”. A good explanation of this term is provided in the study “Jil Oslo, Palestinian Hip-Hop, Youth Culture and Youth Movement” (Maira, 2015).

Throughout Palestine, this generation has struggled with the political conjunctures of the first and second intifadas, the establishment of a state without real sovereignty, and the formation of separate political regimes governing the West Bank and Gaza after 2007.

Maira’s accurate description of this generation intertwined with that of Herrera’s notion of changed youth behaviors and activism forms in the digital age, serve as my conceptual basis when talking about Palestinian youth and youth movements in this dissertation.

## **Case Studies**

### **Gaza Strip: the case of GYBO and the 15 March Movement**

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the studies I consulted in the substantial literature on the history of the Israeli Palestinian Conflict are Quigley, 1990; Shepherd 2000; Shlaim 2001; Kimmerling & Migdal, 2003; Khalidi, 2007)

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No one predicted the explosive outcome of a seemingly random and insignificant event in the Gaza strip in November 2009. The event was the closure by Hamas, the ruling authority of Gaza Strip, of “Sharek” a local and small independent youth organization. Analysts and researchers referred to it as an example of the increasing restriction on Gaza’s civil society, and the ongoing political rivalry between the two main Palestinian factions, Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank (Sayigh, 2009, 2010; Brown 2010; Salem 2012).

But, if not a noteworthy development in the broader geo-political reality of the Gaza Strip, the closure of Sharek had a dramatic effect in the daily lives of a small group of university students, regular participants in Sharek’s youth programs. Eight outraged university students decided to pour out their immense frustration straight from the depths of their troubled young hearts on their Facebook Page. Using a confrontational language, they wrote a shocking message, which they called: “Gazan Youth Manifesto for Change”. For the very first time, their online statement contained a personalized insult and in defiance of Hamas’s four-year rule in Gaza. To their surprise, the manifesto went viral almost instantly - translated into various foreign languages, shared in global online youth and social activism networks and was covered by major international media outlets<sup>8</sup>.

While this episode was widely covered as a fragment of the online experience and realities of Gazan youth, little was said about what happened after with the youth group that wrote the document. How, only 3 months after their online manifesto, on March 15, 2011, did some members of GYBO become the key organizers of this youth protest in

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/02/free-gaza-youth-manifesto-palestinian>,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKXL5fOXkws>

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Gaza. Going beyond a content analysis of their online manifesto, and bringing the stories of their involvement into these protests, as well as the trajectory of the movement itself in Gaza, was critical. Particularly in light of the fact that the 15 March movement is primarily referred to and analyzed as a case of West Bank youth activism. This is even more puzzling, given the fact that the number of youth who took to the streets in Gaza were reported as much bigger than those in the West Bank. In addition, the way that Hamas forces crushed this nascent movement and violently attacked the protesters was much harsher than the PA's response to the same movement in the West Bank. To my knowledge at the time of writing, this aspect of the movement has not been previously analyzed.

“An open air prison” is the most widely used metaphor when referring to Gaza. A tiny strip of land only 365 km square, surrounded by a tall concrete barrier wall separating it on the south from Egypt, and on the East and North with Israel. To the west of Gaza lies the Mediterranean Sea, access to which is also controlled by Israel. Comprising only one sixth of the Occupied Palestinian territories, it contains more than 1/3 of the entire population. One point eight million people live in Gaza, 67% of whom are ‘48 refugees.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the ongoing military presence and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza presents a different reality. In September 2005, the government of Ariel Sharon disengaged the IDF from the Gaza Strip, withdrawing the Israeli settlers. Nevertheless, because the State of Israel maintains control over its borders, maritime and airspace, the United Nations Security Council, and some countries and humanitarian organizations continue to consider the Gaza Strip as occupied by Israel

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?tabID=512&lang=en&ItemID=1701&mid=3171&wversion=Staging>

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(Scobbie, 2007; Darcy & Reynolds, 2010).

I was uniquely positioned to study in depth the online and offline realities of these young people and locate my research questions within this highly complex context. Between 2006-2009, I worked and traveled twice a week from Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip, entering Gaza through the Erez border crossing on the northern border of Gaza with Israel. I was working for Mercy Corps<sup>10</sup>, an international relief and development agency, in the capacity of Youth Development Program Director for Palestine. At the time, I was overseeing the implementation of a program called “Global Citizen Corps” (GCC), a global youth oriented platform, which facilitated the engagement of thousands of young people in cross-border dialogue, local community actions and collaborative digital productions.

Initially, through the GCC program, I was in close communication with about 80 students from various Universities in Gaza, primarily the Islamic University of Gaza and An-Azhar University. These were students coming from Gaza City, eager to learn or practice their English speaking skills, but also to acquire new skills such as video recording, editing and community mobilization practices. By 2009, the program grew from 80 students to 1500. With this growth, the pool of economic and social backgrounds of the participants also expanded. New participants came from Northern and Southern Gaza, refugee camps included.

As the program grew, so did the pressure of the local authorities on the participating youth who were continuously harassed, threatened or asked to provide information about the activities they attended. I, as an American citizen, was advised by

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<sup>10</sup> Online, [www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org) (February 2, 2011)

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the US Embassy to stop my travels to Gaza due to indication of my travels there posing a direct risk to my security. Under such circumstances, Mercy Corps decided to temporarily shut down the GCC program operation in order to not jeopardize the lives of the students who had been part of these programs for more than four years.

While continuing to work for Mercy Corps in the West Bank, I never traveled back to Gaza. I was profoundly affected at this time, both emotionally and professionally. At times I was feeling very demoralized and at other times, very hopeful. I kept in close touch via emails and phone calls with my students in Gaza. I had also started creating a database recording all this correspondence, writing field notes, as well as following them on Facebook pages and blogs. Despite the sudden end, four years of weekly exposure to the offline realities of these young people that I was working with in Gaza were invaluable. I was given the opportunity to observe closely the behavior of the youth groups, under the most trying circumstances, and make sense of the decisions they were making amid daily hardships.

Upon my return for further fieldwork in the Palestinian territories in 2015, it was still not possible for me to travel back to the Gaza Strip, primarily because of my work history and security concerns. Still, based on my previous contacts, I updated and refreshed my existing database and conducted (from Jerusalem via Skype and through follow-up phone calls) a total of 38 interviews with youth activists in the Gaza Strip. The activists whom I spoke with were born between 1986 and 1990. I only knew about a dozen of them personally. The rest I connected with using the snowball sampling method. Half of these interviews were conducted in English, and the other half in Arabic with translation help.

### **The West Bank: Palestinians for Dignity after the 15 March Movement**

The analysis of the 15 March movement took me first to Ramallah city in the West Bank where I conducted my first interviews. The attention that the 15 March movement got as a Ramallah-based movement is partially explained by the focus of the researchers in the urban culture of Ramallah, shaped primarily by the neo-liberal policies of the Palestinian Authority and the NGO-ized local and international community (Hanafi & Tabar, 2007; Challand, 2008; Merz, 2012; Lang, 2013; Dana 2015). Yet, focusing on Ramallah alone as representative of youth activism across the entire Palestinian territory may lead to a disconnection from the realities in the rest of the Palestinian areas.

The Palestinian youth activists involved in these movements come from various towns and villages across the West Bank, and youth organizing occurs in multiple locations where young people have been involved in ongoing resistance against the Wall and the settlements. In my case, only after 6 interviews conducted in various coffee shops in Ramallah, I found myself driving to various cities and villages of the West Bank in search of the dozens of activists directly involved in a series of protests in the West Bank, following the 15 March movement.

The West Bank is the largest area of the Palestinian Territories that make up the contended State of Palestine. It has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War. It is located on the West bank of the Jordan River. Jordan lies to its east while on its west, north and south is Israel. Today, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2016), around 2.93 million Palestinians live in the occupied West Bank.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> According to the same source the total population in the Occupied Palestinian Territory totaled 4,81 million in 2016.

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Military violence, checkpoints, Israeli settlements, a security wall - as described by the Israelis, or an apartheid wall by the Palestinians, marks the overall context of the West Bank.

Without exaggeration, research under occupation and periodic violence was unpredictable. For example, as soon as I arrived during the first period of my fieldwork, October 2015-February 2016, a wave of protests and youth violence exploded in Jerusalem and the West Bank, sparked by an initial event in the Old City of Jerusalem. This period was characterized by a series of “lone wolf” attacks in the streets of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Israel.

As these events accelerated, so too did the Tweet Storms of Palestinian Youth about the beginning of a potential “Third Intifada”. East Jerusalem was divided by military checkpoints and was also effectively closed from the rest of the West Bank as the Israeli security forces tried to contain the situation. To get from my rented apartment in East Jerusalem to any other part of the city, I had to go through at least 3 different military or police checkpoints during the first few months of that period (October-December 2015).

The impact that this intense period had on me personally was both emotionally exhausting and professionally challenging. Disappointment over cancelled interviews, anxiety over interrogation at military checkpoints, difficulties in coping with the presence of an enlarged military presence throughout the West Bank checkpoints and East Jerusalem, and the intense fear of being caught at the wrong place at the wrong time, were some of the feelings I experienced at the time. While I postponed most of my interviews in the West Bank, it was during this time that I focused on doing Skype

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interviews with 38 activists from Gaza, until the situation in the West Bank settled down or returned to a somewhat normal state.

I resumed my fieldwork more intensely during the entire year of 2016. In my efforts to trace the trajectories of their protests and campaigns, I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 West Bank activists. In order to meet with them, I traveled from the fancy cafes of Ramallah, to the frightfully quiet public squares of central Hebron; from villages near Israeli settlements, such as Gush Etzyon in the southern West Bank, to NGO offices in Bethlehem and Jerusalem; from the enormous student campus at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah, to the smaller, but no less noisy one at Bethlehem University.

On my way to such places, I would also occasionally meet with Palestinian public intellectual figures, academics, policy influencers and media pundits. I consulted surveys conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research [PCPSR], and polls on youth activism by various independent youth NGOs such as Sharek Youth Forum. To understand the breadth, range and reach of youth protests, I also referred to a combination of news reports on the activities, as well as their personalized accounts via social media (Twitter and Facebook) pages and their blogs.

As a result of these various research efforts and interviews, I shifted my initial focus from the online dynamics of the 15 March movement in the West Bank, to the offline stories of the activists involved and the evolution of their actions. Going beyond an online analysis of the actions resulted in my tracing of the story of formation, evolution and break up of one of the youth groups that were at the heart of this movement, such as the Palestinians for Dignity. Most importantly, my attempt to understand the conditions that brought about the formation and dissolution of this group

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led me to discover hidden connections between a network of activists with this youth group at its core, and a cycle of seemingly isolated activities and protests that happened after, in the period of 2011-2012.

### **Israel: Stop the Praver youth movement: A case of cross-Green Line activism**

The Praver plan aimed at relocating at least 40,000 Bedouins from the southern arid Region of Israel, known as Negev in Hebrew or Naqab in Arabic, into designated state locations for the Bedouin population. While the movement itself and forms of protests were new, the Bedouin issue, which the Praver Plan promised to solve, was not. To oppose this plan, loose and leaderless networks of young Palestinians of Israel first took to their online social networks with hashtags and tweets “Stop the Praver Plan” and Facebook groups calling for protests.

As a result, from the period of June-July 2013, days of rage, in the form of massive youth protests took place in Southern and Northern Israel. These protests culminated on 30 November 2013, where Palestinians of Israel, together with Palestinians of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, synchronized their protests by organizing separate demonstrations on the same day within their geographic areas, and shared their protests online via their digital networks. On December 12, 2013, the Government of Israel decided to drop the Praver bill - at least temporarily.

My focus on this particular case study of youth activism of Palestinians living inside Israel changed several times during my fieldwork in 2016. Initially, I had scheduled interviews with a number of youth activists who had been directly involved and engaged in an online campaign and solidarity sit-in on the streets of Haifa. The campaign was called “Hungry for Freedom” and it was organized in response to a hunger

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strike held by 100 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails.

During my interviews with some of these activists regarding this campaign, I also listened to their previous stories of involvement in similar protests. I discovered that “Hungry For Freedom” was neither the first nor the last campaign they had organized. I learned that from the time that I traced the protest movements of young Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, between 2011-2013, groups of Palestinian activists in Israel were also active.

Back in January 2011, they had organized demonstrations in Jaffa, Haifa and Tel Aviv, in solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Furthermore, the same activists had organized and participated their own 15 March Movements in Haifa and Jaffa, while others had joined their Palestinian peers beyond the Green Line, in the West Bank. During this time, social media had played a crucial role in linking these activists with various Palestinian digital networks across borders through sharing their activities online and forging new connections.

By tracing their participation in these events, I discovered similar conditions that enabled these forms of activism for young Palestinians of Israel: They came from both Northern and Southern Israel, were unaffiliated with Political Parties and represented various sections of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, including the Druze, Bedouins, Christians and Muslims. The movement that became the focus of my study “Stop the Praver Plan”, had been primarily studied through the lenses of Bedouin indigenous rights within Israel. I noticed how scholars focus on either the Israeli Jewish youth protests movements during this period 2011 (Alimi, 2012; Allweil, 2013; Grinberg, 2013,

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Schechter, 2013, Amram, 2013, Marom, 2013; Schipper, 2015), or Palestinian Youth movements in the context of Palestinian Territories (Al Shabaka, 2011; Casati, 2016; Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Doha Institute, 2012; Farsakh, 2012; Hilal, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Maira, 2015). As a result analysis on protests movements of Palestinian youth of Israel and the impact of social media in their communication patterns and mobilizing modes was not present.

This indicated to me not only the scarce attention that the protests of the young Palestinians of Israel in the wake of the Arab spring had received, but how much these seemingly separated protest movements were actually connected through a core network of activists across the geographically fragmented and military borders of the Palestinian Territories. I concluded from these interviews that their frequent involvement in a series of protests was evidence of a growing network of activists whose ties were forged at the sites of these protests or in their digital networks with activists from Gaza and the West Bank. Consequently, by the time the biggest “Stop the Praver” youth mobilizations in Israel took place, this youth network, active since 2011, was already well positioned and experienced to organize and mobilize such massive numbers of youth.

While my learning curve was steep, most of the interviews that I conducted with the activists directly involved in this movement were contacts I made thanks to introductions from activists in the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, I would call various activists whom I had interviewed in Gaza and the West Bank, and they also related stories about their involvement in the Praver Movement.

Often the Palestinian activists in Israel whom I spoke to referred to themselves as

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“48-ers”. This definition of the Palestinians of Israel is a symbolic marker of the year 1948 where the foundation for two sharply contrasted narratives lays: For the Israeli people, the historic year marks the creation of and declaration of Independence by the State of Israel. For the Palestinian people, the year marks the beginning of a tragic narrative known in the national memory as the year of Nakbah, (The “Catastrophe” in Arabic).

To collect current data about Palestinian youth of Israel, I relied on several Israeli and Palestinian resources, such as recent surveys and statistics published by the Galilee Society – The Arab National Society for Health Research and Services; youth studies conducted by Baladna - The largest Arab Youth organization within Israel, as well as statistical data drawn from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics.

Today, one-fifth of Israel’s citizen population is Palestinian-Arab; totaling more than 1.6 million citizens. Of these, 82% are Muslims, 9% are Christians and 9% are Druze. In addition, around 200,000 of this population are Arab Bedouin citizens, members of the indigenous Palestinian community who remained on their lands in the Negev (Naqab) region of the country. Palestinian youth constitute more than half of the Palestinian society in Israel, with the 0-29 year old age group constituting 62% of the Palestinian population in Israel.<sup>12</sup> A further 36.0% of the population is age 14 and under, and the median age of Palestinians in Israel is 22 years in the North and just 15 years in the South.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel (2012). Field Research conducted by Baladna: Association for Arab youth in Israel.

<sup>13</sup> Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel (2012). Field Research conducted by Baladna: Association for Arab youth in Israel.

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I have revealed here how my dissertation started as an attempt to analyze the reach and span of three different campaigns and protests organized by small groups and loosely networked Palestinian youth. However, upon my return to Israel and Palestine for my fieldwork during 2015-2016, I started focusing less on the separate online chronicles of these protests and more on their offline evolution, the stories of individuals involved in them, their motivations and their preferred mobilizing ways. More and more, the activists whom I was interviewing resembled a network with ties particularly strengthened at the sites of these protests.

While the groups that they would create would quickly break up after completing a particular campaign, the core members would regroup in different formations, and be involved in different forms of protests and campaigns. I was struck by their conclusion that being un-affiliated with Parties was an advantage. From their perspective, being independent implied opening up a space for expressions around issues that pertained to their daily lives. According to them, issues that were not priorities in the Parties ideological agendas were the ones that brought together young people from different groups within the Palestinian society.

Another conclusion that surprised me was the fact that the break-up of these groups after merely one campaign was intentional. After the 15 March movement, these activists had understood that every group that extends its life beyond the goal of the campaign will sooner or later run into conflict with other existing groups/organizations/parties, and will be crushed. While the activists continued their protests, they left behind their fixed groups, preferring instead loose networks on digital platforms. All of these factors, as they were revealed in the everyday political realities of

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the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, shaped my understanding of the different ways these movements evolved in these three different contexts

### **Research Design and Methodology:**

In addressing the main questions of this study, I relied on a set of mixed approaches with primary reliance on qualitative methods, and secondarily on quantitative methods. As primary methods for qualitative research, I relied on in-depth interviews with 68 Palestinian social media activists. Most of them were recorded; others who did not want to be recorded allowed me to take notes instead. Activists such as Yusuf Jamal, Asmaa Al Goul from Gaza; Fadi Quran, Huwaida Arraf from Ramallah, Bassem Tamimi from Nabi Saleh, Badia Dwaik and Isa Amro from Hebron, Majd Kajal and Maysan Hamdan from Haifa, are among those whom I conducted the most in-depth interviews with and they agreed that I reveal their identities. International newspapers and TV-networks have as such also regularly published their stories as political activists. These include: Al Jazeera; BBC, The Guardian and many more news agencies across Europe and the US.

Other activists who preferred that I not reveal their identities were directly involved in a series of youth movements, protests and campaigns, mostly recognized in their organizing efforts which culminated in the 15 March movement. The actions of these activists, have been met with a similar set of consequences: they have been arrested, jailed or regularly threatened by both Palestinian and Israeli Authorities in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. For example: Asmaa Al Ghoul was threatened by Hamas Authorities for her online blogs; Fadi Quran was arrested by the Israeli authorities for his organizing and participating in various protests, targeting both Israel's occupation of the

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Palestinian Territories, and by the Palestinian Authority security forces for protesting the Palestinian Authority's repressive practices against the harassment of youth activists in Ramallah. These are all facts, documented in the local, regional and international media. The relevance of these activists for this research was crucial, because of their direct involvement in these protests, as well as their familiarity with both online and offline activism in my focal geographies. They pinpointed from their perspectives major points of friction with more formally organized movements. Through these interviews, I gained a deeper understanding of their strategies and tactics, and experiences and motivations for their preferred choices of activism.

The next set of in-depth interviews I conducted with 8 Palestinian scholars, NGO executives and public intellectuals, such as Mohib Shaath in Gaza, Sam Bahour, Prof. Ali Jarbawi, and Khalil Shikaki in Ramallah, Mazin Qumsyeh and Sami Awad in Bethlehem, Khaled Faraj in East Jerusalem Nadim Nashif in Haifa. Through these interviews I sought to understand their perspective on my overall research questions. I was particularly curious to ask the perspective of these scholars and intellectuals about the claims of youth activists about a disconnection between the Oslo generation and the leadership of the Palestinian political movements.

As my primary source for my online research, I employ the results of a broad online content analysis of the Palestinian youth online engagement patterns, through their production and consumption of online content between 2011-2012. I conducted this content analysis of youth actions, as shared by members in online forums and social media, during my PhD training years at the University of Washington, between 2012-2013. At the time I had studied 3 years of formal Arabic at the University of

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Washington. My advanced writing and reading comprehension in Arabic enabled me to conduct the analysis of these social media sites.

Roughly one million (78% of West Bank youth as a demographic group) of Palestinian youth were active Internet users, at the time when Arab youth used Facebook and Twitter as organizing tools for political change, a significant majority of Palestinian youth was paying attention (OVBS 2011). Facebook penetration by Palestinian users reached 1 million in 2012, with 18-24 year olds as the largest age group (487,280 users), followed by 25-34 year olds.<sup>14</sup> I tried to make sense of these numbers by engaging in an online content analysis of the engagement patterns of this entire group of Palestinian Internet users.

Before I delve further into this data set, and as tempting as it is to search for large data sets and broad statistics, I must admit the serious challenges a researcher faces, in the Palestinian case. Presenting solid data collection on Palestinian usage of Internet can be deceptive, since it requires that Palestine be presented as a single unit, when in reality, it is not (Aouragh, 2012). On one hand, the '48 Palestinians (Palestinians who live in Israel and hold Israeli citizenship) receive all communication services from Israeli service providers. On the other Palestinians in the '67' areas (the Palestinian Territories occupied by Israel in 1967) are further divided into three groups: The first and largest group, lives in the West Bank, the second in the Gaza Strip, and the third living in East Jerusalem. The Palestinians of West Bank, receive most communication services from Palestinian

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<sup>14</sup> Evidence in a recent report on social media in the West Bank and Gaza Strip found that 40% of the Palestinian population there are active on social-media sites, most notably Facebook (Spark, 2013). Statistics reveal that the annual rate of increase for Facebook and Twitter users in Palestine in 2012-2013 was the highest of the Arab countries, an astonishing 232%

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telecommunication companies. Some, however, receive services from Israeli companies, as a result of the West Bank's economic dependency on the Israel's economy.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip also hold Palestinian Authority identity cards, and receive their communication on services from different Palestinian companies. The situation is quite different for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, since they live under the jurisdiction of the Hamas government, and are therefore restricted by its regulations in regards to communications. Palestinians from East Jerusalem receive all communication services from Israeli thus giving them Israeli residency.

This is why, determining the accurate figures of the percentage of Internet usage amongst Palestinians across borders is very complicated. Technically, the data on Internet usage in the different areas of Palestinian residence is scattered between several bodies and split among Israeli and Palestinian service Providers. Thus, there is not a single body that is able to provide this data in a unified form. Still, understanding the online patterns of Palestinian youth engagement and how have they evolved, how do they relate to other similar movements in the Palestinian Territories, and to what degree social media has influenced their communication and mobilizing patterns, remained crucial in my study. So I decided to work with the data that I had available, despite its limitations.<sup>15</sup>

My initial research, conducted online, and prior to my fieldwork, included evaluation of about 400 online sources (200 Facebook pages, 200 Blogs / Tweets of Palestinian youth mostly in Arabic, but English too, reaching an audience of about 400,000 Palestinian users). I wanted to first understand how this information structure affected the capacity of Palestinian youth to consume and produce information online. I

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this dissertation rely on a combination of several Israeli and Palestinian sources in order to address this obstacle.

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particularly focused on two digital platforms: Facebook and Blogs. The owners of these FB pages and bloggers were from both the West Bank and Gaza and ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old.

This content analysis on the Palestinian digital communication pattern lead me to two conclusions. The first conclusion was that as a result of a growing regional information infrastructure and with the large majority of users present online, Palestinian youth skills to consume and produce content online also grew significantly. The second conclusion that I reached was the particular effect of the blogosphere, in the ability of young Palestinians to find and express their own political voice through alternative mediums of expression such as blogs. The bloggers were inter-connected, speakers of Arabic and English, promoting issues they feel passionate about, creating, sharing and consuming information both political and personal.

These blogs, Facebook comments, and narratives posted in various digital platforms from social media activists provided an ideal jumping-off point for understanding the role of the new technologies for youth activism in the Palestinian territories. During my fieldwork in 2015, I interviewed some of these bloggers I had been following from 2011-2015. For some time now they were personalizing their grievances primarily online, the most acute one being the disavowal of their emotional bonds with their current ruling elites, and dismissal of rigid ideological frames in which they have no say.

In short, this quantitative part of my research indicated that an emerging network of Palestinian Youth was just finding each other online. When the torrent of the events of

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the Arab Spring exploded, the political demands of their Arab peers offered an outlet for these youth groups to stir something deeply missing in the political foundation of Palestinian national bodies, participatory democratic mobilization (Khalil, 2013; Herrera 2013). The decentralized nature of new technologies enabled youth groups to create and share their own narrative and their original voices with a local and international audience.

Lastly, I bring into this analysis a collection of about 250 news articles, published in mainstream media outlets, such as NY Times, Al Jazeera, the Atlantic, the Guardian, Al Monitor, Maan, etc. However, what proved particularly important was my daily subscription and follow up of news from a selected group of online news networks, particularly focused on Palestinian - Israeli events such as Mondweiss,<sup>16</sup> Electronic Intifada,<sup>17</sup> +972,<sup>18</sup> etc. These sources proved extremely valuable for two reasons: some of the activists that I interviewed wrote and reported directly for these news sites, sometimes from the location of their protests, others were interviewed directly about their involvement and the dynamics of their participation in the events that I analyze in this study.

Finally, while I believe that such a combined approach of online and offline methods, as well as various fieldwork, is a methodological strength of this study, some limitations are also worth mentioning here. While the Palestinians of Gaza, the West Bank and Israel are the main focus of this study, the diaspora Palestinians are not

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<sup>16</sup> <http://mondoweiss.net>

<sup>17</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net>

<sup>18</sup> <https://972mag.com>

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included here. For reasons of time, resources and contacts, this study is limited to only the youth groups analyzed here in their own contextual realities of Gaza, the West Bank and Palestinians of Israel (and in particular Haifa). These youth groups do not represent all of the youth of Palestine, or all forms of youth movements in Palestine.

In addition, the geographical separations are manifest in a maze of categories of Palestinians: Palestinians within the Palestinian territories, Palestinians of the Diaspora, Palestinians of Israel, refugees and non-refugees, and those living in rural versus urban settings. While I describe some of these nuances in separate chapters, by no means is this study intended to explain comprehensively the legal, geographic and political status of a nation without a state, such as Palestine.

### **What Happens Next**

The second chapter's central question is why and how did members of four youth groups negotiate and agree on the core demand: "People want the end of the division" (between the two main Palestinian Political Factions, Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza), in what is now widely referred as the 15 March youth movement (2011). With a primary focus on the formation and dissolution of GYBO (Gaza Youth breaks out) youth group, I reveal how the first public rejection of the ruling authority of Gaza, Hamas, since its election in 2006, happened online through the viral spread of a scathing online document posted by GYBO. Beyond the online ripples that this document caused, I shift the focus to the effect it had afterwards on the daily lives of the activists who wrote the text and their involvement in the 15 March Movement. I embed their actions and reactions within a series of internal and external events between 2006 - the electoral

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victory of Hamas in Gaza, and 2011- the heyday of the Arab Uprisings. I conclude that through a strategy of shaming their political actors online, a rising network of young activists stripped away their own political affiliations.

In the third chapter, I examine a wave of youth led protests that took place in the West Bank between 2011 and 2013, organized by a youth group called “Palestinians for Dignity”. Notwithstanding Israel’s military checkpoints across the West Bank, and the PA’s police brutality in crushing their initiatives, the activists of the Palestinians for Dignity led an impressive and sustained number of online and offline protests for almost three years. Then they decided to break-up and return to their informal ties and digital networks. This chapter seeks to explain ‘Why?’ despite the success of their protests, were these youth groups not able to move beyond issue specific initiatives, and develop a common purpose and strategy, which could have led to longer-term consequences in their attempt to affect social change?

In answering this question, I examine the formational dynamics of the “Palestinians for Dignity”, created in the aftermath of the 15 March movement in the West Bank. I conclude that, through their repeated cycles of protests, the PFD forged a new strategy of resistance, shifting targets of protest and alternating between Israeli and Palestinian controlling structures. I also conclude in this chapter that the ideas, campaigns and protests of the PFD marked a return to a more creative phase of popular resistance in the West Bank.

Chapter four deals with the mobilizing dynamics of the “Prawer Movement”- a series of online and massive offline youth mobilizations against the Prawer Plan led by young Palestinians of Israel in 2013. The central objective of this chapter is to understand

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why and how a protest campaign demanding Bedouin rights within Israel, became a cross border Palestinian youth movement demanding Palestinian national rights?

I conclude that the impressive youth mobilizations of July-November 2013 were a turning point for the political awareness of young Palestinians of Israel. It revealed the ongoing evolution of the mobilizing modes and strengthening of ties of a growing network of Palestinian activists across borders. It signified their evolving attempts to forge new connections through their digital networks and new strategies for resistance, as inspired by the demands of their own communities. My findings in this chapter also indicate the Arab Spring created a moment in time where the hopes of Palestinians in Israel about their level of citizenship aligned with the national aspirations of the young Palestinians across the Green Line. This movement also exposed the vast political potential of a network of Palestinians able to unite efforts across the fragmented segments of Palestinian society into one broad-based movement.

## Chapter 2: Gaza's Forgotten Revolution

There is a revolution growing inside of us, an immense dissatisfaction and frustration that will destroy us unless we find a way of canalizing this energy into something that can challenge the status quo and give us some kind of hope.

### Gaza Youth Manifesto For Change

On a cold morning of November 30<sup>th</sup> 2010, the Security Forces of Hamas- the ruling authority of the Gaza Strip stormed in and shut down the offices of an independent Palestinian Youth Organization<sup>19</sup>, Sharek Youth Forum<sup>20</sup>, which focused on empowerment and capacity building amongst Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza. Sharek was not the first or last NGO that was closed<sup>21</sup>, nor the only one accused of corrupting the religious sentiment of youth in Gaza with Western values.<sup>22</sup> Yet, for a group of young Palestinians, its forced closure was “the final drop that made our hearts tremble with frustration and hopelessness”.<sup>23</sup> In response to that event, they protested in front of the offices of Sharek. Local Palestinian news outlets reported that some 20 protesters were arrested, some tortured, and others threatened.<sup>24</sup>

Later on that day, eight of these protesters, university students, assembled in one of Gaza's coffee shops to express their deep feelings of fear, sorrow and loss. They talked about the bitter conflict between the two dominant Palestinian Parties Fatah and

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19 Retrieved from <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=338296>

20 Retrieved from [http://sharek.ps/en/?page\\_id=113](http://sharek.ps/en/?page_id=113)

21 Retrieved from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2013/01/palestine-ngo-economic-challenges.html>

22 The director of Gaza's Branch was accused of “ethical corruption, encouraging non-veiling, mixing of the sexes, and teaching music and dancing”.

23 Excerpt from the GYBO manifesto posted on their FB page.

24 <http://cyberdissidents.org/bin/content6bfe.html?ID=503&q=3&s=24>

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Hamas since 2006, which consumed them on a daily basis. They recalled their experiences of fear during the bloody war between the militias of the two main parties in 2007. They remembered the family members and friends lost during the 2008 war of Israel with Gaza. And here they were, mourning over the closure of an NGO office! One of them, Ibrahim, remembers vividly the emotions of outrage and powerlessness that overcame him and his friends while debating what action to take. In his interview with me, he conveyed what they discussed in that meeting: “Everyone talks about Gaza; everyone speaks on our behalf! But no one really feels us, hears us or cares about us”. Overpowered by a sense of distrust with formal mediums of expression and abandonment from official power authorities, their first instinct was to reject them all outright. First, they created a group, which they called “Gaza Youth Breaks Out” (GYBO).

Deliberately, and beyond government or media control, they chose Facebook as a free online platform to communicate their message of outrage. They also were very aware of the confrontational language they intended to use to voice their discontent. One of the founders of GYBO, Ibrahim said to me: “We were sick of formal Hamas press releases and tired of the polite talk of sterile NGO reports! We wanted to give it strong to people- just like we felt it ourselves! There were going to be no limits to our language- no limits!”.

True to their own words and in stark rejection of official narratives, they wrote a message they called a Manifesto. They shared it initially with a trusted network of friends who gave their support. The message, written in English, contained a very direct and personalized insult, never ever shared publicly before. But privately and quietly, it was the first word that had slipped from the lips of everyone present in the street on the day

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they closed Sharek: “Fuck Hamas!” Following that insult, an all-inclusive and unforgiving string of curses poured out from the depths of their troubled young hearts like rolling stones on their Facebook Page:

Fuck Israel. Fuck Hamas. Fuck Fatah. Fuck UN. Fuck UNWRA. Fuck USA! We, the youth in Gaza, are so fed up with Israel, Hamas, the occupation, the violations of human rights and the indifference of the international community! We want to scream and break this wall of silence, injustice and indifference like the Israeli F16’s breaking the wall of sound. We want to scream with all the power in our souls in order to release this immense frustration that consumes us because of this fucking situation we live in (GYBO, Facebook Status update, 2012).

They did not expect what happened next.<sup>25</sup> Their raging manifesto went viral almost instantly – was translated into various foreign languages, shared in global online youth and social activism networks and covered by major international media outlets.<sup>26</sup> Everyone in Gaza was talking about GYBO and especially the local police were searching, asking who the anonymous authors were. Initially, word of mouth in Gaza reached the eight friends who in their incendiary document had spared none of the internal or external political actors. Shocked, by both feelings of joy for being heard, but also fearing for their lives, the GYBO friends called each other and met again secretly. Ibrahim recalls: “We freaked out! We got scared for our families and ourselves. What now? What’s next? No one knew us in Gaza. We had no real connections, no strategy, no action plan, nothing”. Ayman, another founding member of GYBO, whom I interviewed noted:

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<sup>25</sup> This is the only the opening paragraph of a one thousand word document, or what is now known as the Gazan Youth Manifesto for change

<sup>26</sup> Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/02/free-gaza-youth-manifesto-palestinian>,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKXL5fOXkws>

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There was one curse in that statement that was really new and the one that shocked everyone. No one had ever come clean about his or her true feelings about Hamas. Yet, we had no idea how many young people felt and shared our pain and rage! A sense of fulfillment after our emotional outburst was overwhelming. Our voice was finally heard, loud and clear! It seemed like the revolution that we had wished for on Facebook, could actually happen for real, in the street! (Personal Communication, October 3, 2015).

Three months later, in March 2011, after secret meetings and communication on Facebook and Twitter, a handful of such activists from about 60 small leaderless groups became organizers of the March 15<sup>th</sup> youth led demonstrations, marching in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank. After endless debates among these groups, they came up with a slogan for their movement: “End the Division”. The statement meant the end of the then four year-long bitter split and division between Hamas and Fatah- the two main parties dominating Palestinian politics: Hamas rules the Gaza Strip and Fatah rules the West Bank. Yet, this formal demand was not at all present in GYBO’s ultimatum for change, which had sparked the online rebellion. Why and how did these groups change their initial position from blaming ALL internal and external actors for their situation (Israel, Fatah, Hamas, UN, USA)- to laying the blame squarely on their Parties alone?

GYBO’s online manifesto was widely covered as a fragment of the online experiences and realities of Gazan youth. While Sharek’s closure was referred to as a case in point which revealed the increased political schism between Hamas and Fatah, and the increased control of the public sphere from Hamas in Gaza (Sayigh, 2010. pp.4).

Still, little was said about what happened after with the youth group that wrote the document, and how did they cope with their loss of that one space that had meant so much to them. How, on March 15, 2011, did some members of GYBO, connected with other youth groups in Gaza, coordinate with their Palestinian peers in the West Bank, and

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become the key organizers of the biggest youth protests in Gaza for a long time. Going beyond a content analysis of their online manifesto, and bringing the stories of their involvement in these protests, as well as tracing the trajectory of this movement itself in Gaza, is critical.

Extensive scholarship, and hundreds of Op-Eds and news reports<sup>27</sup>, has largely examined a series of dramatic developments in Gaza between 2006-2011, in order to measure their impact on the broader dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Usher, 2006; Hroub, 2006; Shiqaqi, 2006; Zweiri, 2006; Chehab, 2007; Tamimi, 2007). Even in those few cases where some scholarly works mention the GYBO episode that opens this chapter, they primarily do so to examine the broader push and pull factors in the changing relations between the two main Palestinian Parties ( Hamas and Fatah), Israel and the rest of world (Sayigh, 2009, 2010; Brown 2010; Salem 2012).

This literature does not show how a seemingly irrelevant development in the broader geo-political reality of the Gaza Strip, such as the closure of Sharek had a dramatic effect on the daily lives of a small group of University students, regular participants in Sharek's youth programs. The perspective of these youth voices is often missing or covered as an afterthought in these works. This is my particular focus in this chapter. It allows me to shed light on the perspective of the young people who actually endured the month-to-month grind of these dramatic developments, as well as to reveal how did such events affect their behavioral relations with their parties.

In addition, when it comes to examining newer forms of activism and protests of

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-chronology-idUSL1752364420070617>

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Palestinian youth at the wake of the Arab Spring (2011), the latest research primarily focuses on youth activism in the West Bank, while youth protests in Gaza are often understudied. The 15 March youth mobilizations is an example in case. Although this youth movement took place across different sites in the Palestinian Territories and even inside Israel, it is primarily referred to and analyzed as a case of West Bank youth activism (Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Salem, 2012, Salem & Golan 2014; Natil, 2012, Burton, 2015). This is even more puzzling, given the fact that the number of youth who took to the streets in Gaza was reported as much bigger than those in the West Bank (Maira, 2015). In addition, the way that Hamas forces crushed this nascent movement and attacked violently the protesters was much harsher than the PA's response to the same movement in the West Bank. To my knowledge at the time of writing, the examination and trajectory of this movement in Gaza has not been previously analyzed.

My research intends to address these shortcomings. My goal is twofold: on one hand I will situate the 15 March movement organized in Gaza in the networked 15 March Youth Movement across the Palestinian territories, and more broadly against the backdrop of the regional uprisings of 2010. By doing so, I seek to identify the impact of the new technologies of communication on their day-to-day communication patterns. I also demonstrate how some Egyptian demands of their Arab peers, at the wake of the Arab Spring, resonated with young Palestinians and were spread by the wind of hope in their own Palestinian Context. On the other hand, I seek to analyze the formational dynamics of these newer protests, in the contextual particularities of the Gaza Strip, in order to explain the different trajectory of this movement in Gaza.

I argue that despite its ultimate failure to affect the unity of the Parties, the 15 March movement revealed instead the permanent strategic rupture between this emerging group of actors and their traditional parties. Through a strategy of shaming their political actors online, a rising network of young activists stripped away their own political affiliations. Such a rupture was an indicator of increased attempts from these activists to be recognized as different from the dominant organizations and their ideological agendas in an evolving Palestinian context.

The story of “Gaza Youth Breaks Out” (GYBO)<sup>28</sup> represents a case where small and leaderless youth groups from Gaza strip, primarily coordinating through social media with youth groups from West Bank and even inside Israel, came willingly together to effect change in their world. Such activists immediately reacted to a sudden event that disrupted their daily lives, stirring within them a deep emotional well. They used primarily social tools of Facebook and Twitter to communicate and mobilize, willingly bypassing official affiliation with parties or formally organized social movements for change. Next, they turned their online dissent into organized massive street protests, translating their online anger into action on the street.

### **Situating youth activism in the Gaza strip**

In a context marked by insurmountable constraints such as the complete isolation of Gaza from the rest of the Palestinian territories, frequent wars between Israel and Hamas, and brutal rivalry between the two main Palestinian parties ruling in the West

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<sup>28</sup> Today, their Facebook page counts 45 thousand followers in addition to around 21 thousand followers on Twitter.

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Bank and Gaza, it seemed initially impossible for scattered and small youth groups, inexperienced and politically unaffiliated individuals, to overcome their fear and pour in massive numbers into the streets of Gaza to demand change.

Statistics of the last decade, with regard to youth activism in Gaza, reveal similar conclusions. Taken together, they indicate the decline of political activism amongst youth in Palestine. Sayre and Botmeh (2010) reported that nearly 75 percent of youth were unwilling to be involved in politics, with only 7.6 percent of Palestinian youth claiming that they were members of a political organization. Sharek Youth Forum, an independent Palestinian youth organization, reported in 2011 that a majority (62 percent) of Palestinian youth did not trust any of their political factions. Studies from FAFO (Institute for Applied Social Science) in 2011, and 2013 and AWRAD (Arab World for Research and development) in 2013 published similar results and statistics. At the time of writing, the most recent poll concluded by AWRAD reiterated this dismal view, with 73% of the Palestinian youth in West Bank and Gaza projecting “A bleak future outlook”. These numbers, conveying such a doom and gloom picture, imply that nothing feasible is likely to take place in the Palestinian Territories

Yet, GYBO and others seemed to defy these low expectations and took to the streets of Gaza, against almost impossible odds. This is why it is important that in this chapter I investigate the formation, member dynamics and evolution of small Palestinian youth groups into a networked youth movement, in the Gaza Strip, from December 2010 to March 2011. To do so, I delve into the contextual particularities of the Gaza Strip where I trace the evolution and dissolution of four such groups over four months: GYBO, “15 March Youth Group”, “15 March Group” and “Palestinian Youth Movement”. The

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timeline for this narrative starts in 2006, with the unexpected electoral victory of the current ruling authority, Hamas. I also factor here the following split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 and the acute restriction of public space and greater control of NGO's activity afterward. Finally, I interject in my analysis two particular developments that created both a sense of hope (the Arab Spring) and one that exacerbated a sense of despair (Gaza war of 2008 / 2009).

Despite my questions centering on the 2011 movements, each of the 38 interviewees born between 1986 and 1990 from the Gaza Strip whom I spoke with, referred to his or her personal experiences during these dramatic developments to explain their motivations. I have included these events as they were experienced through the personal accounts of 38 interviews that I conducted via Skype and phone, and serve to highlight how these particular contextual events shaped the life experiences and their political involvement which culminated as the 15 March Movement of 2011.

Activists that I interviewed shared with me their experiences from opening their Facebook group pages, to the struggle on their social networks to agree on one common demand, to protesting in the street with thousands of young Palestinians, and then dissolving again. Such detailed accounts of their online and offline activism is helpful in revealing their shared and evolving experiences as young activists: From communicating instantly online about issues that are personal to them, to framing their demands as a group and then taking it to the streets of their own communities. When I refer to these subjects, I use pseudonyms in an effort to protect their real identities.

According to my in-depth interviews, each of these events was crucial in fomenting distress and disappointment among a growing number of disillusioned youth

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vis-à-vis the two major political forces in the Palestinian Politics: Hamas and Fatah<sup>29</sup>.

Although increased sentiments of distrust and outrage that culminated in the 15 March movement of 2011 were germinated long before that.

There are currently 1.8 million residents in the Gaza Strip only, with three-fourths of Gazans under the age of 29 and nearly half (45%) under the age of 15.<sup>30</sup> Close to 70% of the Gaza Strip population is 25 years of age and younger and have known nothing but occupation and factional hegemonies, with Hamas running the main service social network in the Gaza Strip (Roy, 2011). Hamas, the only ruling authority in Gaza since 2006, was initially established in 1987 with the relatively narrow mandate of carrying out armed operations against Israel on behalf of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and establishing an Islamist alternative to the secular Fatah. Yet, the group soon evolved into a complex and multifaceted organization, comprised of an effective political organization, an armed wing, and an extensive network of social service institutions (Chehab 2009, Tamimi 2010, Roy, 2011).

### **The Foretold Chronicle of a Manifesto for Change**

GYBO's manifesto for change did in fact exceed the group members and their online networks' wildest predictions – as described in the beginning of this chapter. But it was nowhere close to the shock and surprise caused by the results of another manifesto for change in 2006, which captured worldwide attention. It was based on this manifesto that The Islamic Resistance Movement of Palestine (known as Hamas) participated in the

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29 <https://al-shabaka.org/roundtables/palestinian-youth-revolt-any-role-for-political-parties/>

30 Dhillon Navtej, Yousef Tarik, Generation in waiting : The unfulfilled promise of young people in the Middle East (Brookings Institution Press: 2009)

historic 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary Elections, which they won against all possible odds. (Shiqaqi 2006). Unlike the lack of political affiliation of the GYBO authors, a remarkable PR group, right at the heart of the Islamic University of Gaza, had quietly put together a manifesto called: “Change and Reform List” (Chehab, 2007; Tamimi, 2007). There was a difference in the way this document was formatted: no grand political programs and no ideological frameworks concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Zweiri, 2006). Instead, their manifesto focused on the Palestinians' concerns about corruption, unemployment and security and other daily life issues. The Hamas Manifesto “For change and reform” was devised to address the particular popular feeling of revulsion against Fatah<sup>31</sup> (Hroub, 2006). This strategic approach struck a cord with a Palestinian majority in Gaza, particularly the independents and the undecided voters. “I was very happy when they (Hamas) won. I even got a job as a guard in front of their office,” said Fadi, an organizer of the 15 March 2011 Movement and leader of the “15 March Youth” group in Gaza. Born in 1986 in a refugee camp in Gaza, his parents had taught him that “moral behavior and service is above everything else” and had sent him to learn in the Mosque since he was a child. Soon, Fadi grew very sympathetic of Hamas. In his interview with me, he explained his reasons for joining Al Kotla – the Palestinian student-led organization that adopts an Islamic view and supports Hamas in its political stance.

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<sup>31</sup> Khaled Hroub, “A ‘New Hamas’ through Its New Documents,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer 2006), pp. 8–13.

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I liked that they were honest and cared about people. They knew how we felt, what we had and did not have. More than their party goals, they cared about our daily problems and our feelings. I started doing the same. I was always trying to do something good to help my community (Personal Communication, November 24, 2015).

Like a true political savvy, equipped with this acute street awareness and mindfulness of people's emotional states, Fadi became an active member of Al Kotla. He learned how to tap into people's informal networks and heard their complaints. He saw how anger against corruption and lack of law and order was seething everywhere in Gaza.

In fact, for the last five years before the Elections of 2006, The Palestinian Center for Survey and Research, [PCSR] polls had shown that more than 80 percent of the Palestinian public believed the PA (Palestinian Authority –the official government of both the West Bank and Gaza, from 1993-2006) to be corrupt. On Election Day, 75 percent said that they and their families did not feel safe and secure (Shiqaqi 2006). In contrast, the appreciation that the majority of people felt in Gaza for Hamas's social role as service provider grew (Roy 2006; 2011).

In other words Fadi and his friends had felt in person what had shocked most analysts and pollsters at the time: first and foremost with a vote for Hamas, Palestinian voters penalized Fatah in response to its perceived ongoing decay, internal divisions, and record of corrupt and ineffective administration (Zweiri, 2006; Usher, 2006; Shiqaqi 2006). "But everyone in Gaza already knew that would happen"-said Fadi- "except of course for "Fatah, Israel and the USA."

The Hamas manifesto for change of 2006, and the GYBO's manifesto for change, were very different and reached very different audiences, but they did share one

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similarity: they each captured this dissent and outrage of the Gaza's population against corrupt authorities and thus touched a real nerve which gave them momentum. This indicates that the anger and other sentiments of humiliation and powerlessness, seething in the GYBO's Manifesto for change in 2009, were not something new. It also indicated the growing distrust of these youth groups against party agendas for real social and political change. Yet the platform in which the Young GYBO members spread this distrust (Facebook) was new, and the Party against whom they bore most discontent was not Fatah, but this time, Hamas itself.

### **International Reaction**

Fadi was 20 years old when Hamas defeated Fatah in the elections of 2006. His abovementioned quote, in which he explained how everyone in Gaza knew that Hamas would win, but no one else outside Gaza believed- turned out to be true. No one inside or outside the Middle East region expected this twist in a historical moment for Palestinian politics.

"I've asked why nobody saw it coming," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, commenting on Hamas's victory. "It does say something about us not having a good enough pulse."<sup>32</sup> For the first time in the history of the Palestinian Legislative Council (usually known as the Palestinian Authority), an Islamist group, designated as a terrorist organization by the US, Israel and EU, won outright a large majority (72 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Parliament). Never before, since taking over the reigns of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1968, had the nationalist Fatah movement been replaced as the dominant force in Palestinian politics. Regional scholars and analysts

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/30/world/middleeast/rice-admits-us-underestimated-hamas-strength.html>

concluded that the arrival of Hamas, which emerged in 1987 during the first Palestinian uprising as an offshoot of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, would dramatically reshape its relations with Israel and the rest of the world<sup>33</sup> (Zweiri, 2006; Usher, 2006; Shiqaqi, 2006).<sup>34</sup> The entry of Hamas into Palestinian politics presented a dilemma for the international actors. Their response to Hamas's victory centered on international sanctions, financial and political boycotts of a Hamas led Palestinian Authority.

However, this response underestimated the outrage and discontent against Fatah as the primary motivation for the people who voted for Hamas in the first place. Many reports at the time, like the one published by the International Crisis Group in 2008,<sup>35</sup> reveal that the impact of these sanctions hurt not the rulers, but the ruled (Sayigh, 2007). By the end of March 2007, a whole year after the imposition of international sanctions, only 13% blamed Hamas for the failure to improve economic and security conditions, while 37% blamed Israel and 25% the United States and the international community<sup>36</sup>. These polls indicate how ordinary Gazans resented primarily Israel for imposing a siege, the West for supporting it and Fatah for acquiescing to it. Similarly, about 65% of my interviewees primarily blamed the same external actors for their economic punishment and Gaza's siege.

#### The international response towards the new political order in Gaza, centered

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33 Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/26/AR2006012600372.html>

34 Most sarcastically this dilemma is captured in this news report : "Americans are saying 'No, unless...' to Hamas, and the Europeans are saying 'Yes, if.. EU and US wait on Hamas', International Herald Tribune, 31 January 2006.)

35 Middle East Report, nr 73 : Ruling Palestine I: Gaza under Hamas, March 2007

36 Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. 23, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 22–24 March 2007, <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2007/p23e1.html>.

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primarily with sanctions, impacted severely vulnerable parts of an already impoverished Gaza population. This increased the perceptions of Gazans as being punished for their political vote. It aggravated their reality of siege and isolation. As a result, it increased a sense of distrust against the Western political institutions and exacerbated the alienation of those groups of people who had already grown tired of the new authoritarian rulers in their area: Hamas.

### **The Battle of Gaza June 10-14, 2007**

If it wasn't for a painful personal experience, Fadi, might have still been a member of Al Kotla today. "I will never forget the moment when I saw Hamas soldiers pointing a gun towards a family member of mine. Something broke in me. It affected me deeply. I thought, 'something is wrong here.'" That personal experience shook his beliefs about both parties, to the core.

What Fadi is referring to here, is known as "The Battle of Gaza", a 4-day war started on June 10 -14, 2007, between the two militias of the two major Parties, Fatah and Hamas. A chilling Press Release from Human Rights Watch indicated the depth of the bloodshed that occurred during those four days<sup>37</sup>. An ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) report estimated that at least 118 people were killed and more than 550 wounded during the fighting. Accounts of killings and frightening executions were haunting everyone's dreams and they wondered what would happen next.<sup>38</sup> In a 2008 report published by the International Crisis Group, a foreign doctor working in Gaza revealed that during the conflict, Gaza's amputee population doubled. On 14 June 2007,

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37 Human Rights Watch (2007, June). Gaza: Armed Palestinian groups commit grave crimes. Retrieved from : <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/06/12/gaza-armed-palestinian-groups-commit-grave-crimes>

38 International committee of the Red Cross [ICRC]. (2007, June). Latest report on ICRC activities in the field. Gaza- West Bank. ICRC bulletin no 21. Retrieved from : <http://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/opt-gaza-icrc-bulletin-no-21-2007>

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after Hamas' fighters soundly defeated his forces, President Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the Palestinian Unity government. The 2007 war between Fatah and Hamas marked the formal political split between these two parties, with Hamas maintaining control of Gaza and Fatah of the West Bank. Since then, the two rival governments rule in Ramallah and in Gaza, each claiming constitutional legitimacy and backed by its own forces.

“I resigned my membership in Al Kotla,” said Fadi to me and his change of heart was not unique. Similar stories were shared with me by about 60% of my interviewees- for whom the significance of this event was profound in their personal lives. “It was something terrible, what we experienced here in 2007, which divided brother from brother, and caused a lot of conflict amongst the people”- said Yusuf, another future organizer of the March 2011 movement. He resigned from “Al Shabiba”, Fatah’s youth division, to work with Fadi to form a new, independent youth group they named the “End the Palestinian Division”.

In addition to these personal experiences, on a broader scale, the Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 and the consequences of that bloody war were devastating. Palestinian public opinion reacted negatively to both the Fatah-Hamas feud and to the subsequent armed takeover. By the fall of 2007, Hamas had indeed lost a significant chunk of support, especially in Gaza. A September 2007 poll by An-Najah National University in the West Bank reported that as many as 57.6% of interviewed Palestinians (and 65.4% of Gazans) deemed the Hamas takeover as an illegitimate “coup”. A 2008 ICG (International Crisis Group) report refers to Hamas support in Gaza falling by at least ten percent between September 2006 and November 2007 (ICG, “Ruling Palestine I,” p. 21). As I have indicated above, from my interviewees’ perspective, the change in

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their day-to-day lives was drastic. This change felt more acute with a growing restriction of the public sphere and the political tit-for-tat war between Hamas and Fatah.

### **Voiceless in Gaza: restricting the public sphere**

For Asmaa al Ghoul, 2007 was the hardest year of her life- but also one that made her a public, yet very controversial figure, in Gaza and outside. She had seen heard and felt a lot in that year when Hamas assumed control of all institutional aspects of life in Gaza (Brown 2007; Berti 2012; Sayigh 2012).

At this time Asmaa was blogging passionately, an experience that in retrospect made her “witness some things for the first time in her life, react momentarily and reflect on them years later”. One thing that she experienced for the first time was the split between the two parties. Born in 1986 in Rafah in Southern Gaza, Asmaa grew up with a passion for “poetry and freedom”. Described by many as a “secularist” or a “feminist”, Asmaa likes none of these labels. These, according to her, can capture only one glimpse of her reality-at a given time-period, but no more than that.

Like that glimpse of her reality in Gaza in 2007 when she penned a piece in Arabic called: “Dear Uncle, Is that the homeland we want?” This was Asmaa’s very critical letter addressed publicly to her own uncle, a senior Hamas military leader. Unlike a typical journalistic report, this was a personalized letter where Asmaa unabashedly criticized her uncle for forcing Islamic views on the Gaza population and shamed him for torturing members of their own family in Gaza who were loyal to Fatah.<sup>39</sup> Asmaa’s writing has caused very different reactions: in Gaza in 2007, she drew the ire of her uncle who threatened to disown and kill her. In 2012, the girl who also became famous

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.iwfmf.org/blog/2012/10/08/asmaa-al-ghoul-2012-courage-in-journalism-award/>

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for defying Hamas with her witty notes such as “Sorry Hamas, I am wearing Jeans today”<sup>40</sup> won the Courage in Journalism Award. In my interview with her, Asmaa recalls that time when she was completely consumed by politics in the streets and her writings in the newspapers and blogs. Most of the experiences that triggered a sense of anger, defiance and rebellion, as reflected in her writings of that time, had to do with the acute closure of the public space in Gaza.

In their edited volume “Non-State Actors in the Middle East: Factors for Peace and Democracy”, Golan and Salem explain the setback that civil society suffered, which was exacerbated by the top-down approach of authorities in both the West Bank and Gaza (Salem, Golan 2014). During this period, Palestinian civil society broke into three parts: one supporting Hamas, one supporting the PA in Ramallah, and the third, comprised of liberal, democratic independent organizations, supporting neither (Salem, 2012).

The Hamas government in Gaza, under the leadership of Ismail Haniyeh, closed down or restricted a significant number of NGOs from mid-2008 onwards. These were mostly Fatah-affiliated organizations, and the government acted in retaliation for the Palestinian Authority’s closure of hundreds of NGOs in the West Bank believed to be affiliated with Hamas. One example is the decision of Hamas to close 42 local associations in Gaza (Sayigh 2010). In the meantime, young people working or involved in International NGO activists in Gaza were routinely arrested, threatened or accused of “Immoral behavior”. Attacks by Gaza security agencies on peaceful assembly targeted

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/12/gaza-hamas-asma-al-ghoul>

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activities organized by Fatah-affiliated associations, while impromptu public displays of political support for Fatah were swiftly, and harshly, suppressed (Brown, 2007).

The media was also brought under complete control. Only two newspapers were allowed free circulation in Gaza after June 2007: *Felesteen*, published by Hamas, and *al-Istiqlal*, published by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In its first year, the Haniyeh government occasionally prevented the distribution of the West Bank and East Jerusalem dailies *al-Ayyam*, *al-Hayat al-Jadidah*, and *al-Quds* when it objected to specific content, but since mid-2009 it is Israel that prevents Palestinian newspapers from entering Gaza (Sayigh 2009, 2012).

Amid growing authoritarianism and closure of the public sphere for participation in Gaza, voiceless young people in Gaza felt even more marginalized and excluded (Brown 2005, 2010). Asmaa, in danger for her life, and many other critical voices, had to temporarily leave Gaza. My understanding from my interviews confirms my conclusions in preliminary studies of engagement patterns of Palestinian youth online, which I had concluded during my PhD training at the University of Washington. At this time, primarily via blogs, a group of young people, as exemplified in the examples of Asmaa, Yusuf, and Fadi, started talking to each other about this invisible yet massive and fearful wall of silence enveloping them daily. Based on these interviews, the most powerful force for the foundation of that wall starts with the split, or what Sayigh calls “the confidence-destroying behavior of both parties”. Less than one year later, the same population endured another devastating war, this time a 22 day long bombing campaign undertaken by Israel with the stated objective of destroying Hamas.

### **Operation Cast Lead: December 27 January 21 2009**

Nothing and no one will erase from Ayman's memories that morning of December 27, 2008. Eight years later, this GYBO founder and co-writer of their manifesto, in his interview with me, said, "This war was a turning point in my life. I was never the same again. Sometimes I feel so sad, and other times so angry... It is such a difficult situation."

On December 27, 2008, Israel launched a devastating bombing campaign codenamed Operation Cast Lead, a massive, 22-day military assault on the Gaza Strip. This military campaign was aimed at ending rocket attacks from Gaza on Israel by armed groups affiliated with Hamas and other Palestinian factions. Large areas of Gaza had been razed to the ground, leaving many thousands homeless and the already dire economy in ruins. In addition Israel and Egypt kept Gaza's borders sealed so its 1.5 million inhabitants could neither leave nor find a place in Gaza where their safety could be guaranteed.

On January 18, 2009, under enormous international pressure and just two days before Barack Obama was sworn in as President of the United States, Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew its forces from Gaza. Several reports issued by Amnesty International, as well as UN fact finding missions, concluded that by 18 January 2009, when unilateral ceasefires were announced by both Israel and Hamas, around 1,400 Palestinians had been killed, including some 300 children, more than 115 women and some 85 men over the age of 50.<sup>41</sup> Thirteen Israelis were also killed, including 3

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41 Amnesty International (2009, July). Israel- Gaza; Operation "Cast Lead", 22 days of death and destruction. Amnesty International Publications. Retrieved from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE15/015/2009/en/>

civilians.<sup>42</sup>

During that fateful campaign, Ayman's house was destroyed and his father killed. A young man then, now a father of 2 young children, the war of 2008 changed Ayman's life forever.

I still remember the day after... I did not know what to do, with myself, with my father, with my house... But then I saw a big crowd of people walking towards me. Many people that I never knew before came to help and organize my father's funeral. I will never forget that moment. That experience of loss and dispossession gave me, for the first time, the true feeling of being a Palestinian (Personal Communication, October 1, 2015).

Born in a refugee camp in Lebanon in 1986, Ayman was 10 years old when he arrived in Gaza in 1996; only 3 years after the Oslo Accords were signed between the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. At that time, hopes seemed high for Palestinians. In 1994 a self-governing Palestinian Authority was established with an aim to end the conflict. Finally, in 1996, around the time that Ayman arrived in Gaza, the first ever-Palestinian parliamentary elections were held to form the first Palestinian Authority government. No further elections took place until 2006.

In my interview with Ayman, he told me that he really liked his life in Lebanon and for a brief time of his childhood, in Tunisia as well. But Palestine was the land of his dreams:

I grew up with a strong sense of belonging and endless heroic stories of the First Intifada. My imagination was bursting with images of proud Palestinian peasants defending their land and the unbeatable Palestinian fighters with *Keffiyeh* fighting for their freedom from Israel (Personal Communication, October 1, 2015).

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42 United Nations (2009, December). Report of the United Nations fact-finding mission on the Gaza conflict. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf>

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Ayman discovered an altogether different world in Gaza, yet he shielded himself from this painful reality by immersing himself in his passion for music and his belief that Rap could save him and become his daily escape. He found relief in using the new technologies to create sounds from his world of music and share them online with people he knew and many others he didn't know at all. Often his rap lyrics were biting, sarcastic and angry, revealing most of his feelings about the situation in his strip of land.

In 2009, following Operation Cast Lead, I traveled and worked in Gaza as an aid worker for an international NGO, Mercy Corps. I met with a group of young university students who shared with me their memories of living under such terror. "I will never forget how every night I would text my friends and family from my phone wishing good night and how I hoped to see them alive in the morning. Every morning I would check my phone the first time, trembling with fear that I would hear bad news from some of them". What impressed me most when I spoke with the same group of people, now seven years later, is that to them these events are so vivid – they talk about them as if they took place only a few days ago.

Within the space of a little over a year, these young people had experienced a civil war in 2007, and the grueling reality of another war, this time Operation Cast Lead. This double context of authoritarianism and occupation- evident in the economic and military siege by Israel of Gaza, serves to underscore as a bleak reality that shaped the daily lives of these young activists, while continuing in limiting their opportunities for normal lives and self-expression.

Heartbroken and traumatized, these young people picked up what was left from their lives and resumed their activities to the degree that was possible. Fadi spent most of

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his time helping families affected by the Israel assault on Gaza. Ibrahim enjoyed practicing his English speaking skills in his English Club. Ayman used the new technologies to create rap music - his last refuge of peace. Their feelings of uncertainty, isolation and hopelessness is exemplified in the following quote:

It was hard for us to realize how hopelessly we were trapped in Gaza: If you start talking against Hamas you get labeled as a collaborator and can be killed for that. If you criticize Israel, they either bomb you or you will never be allowed to leave Gaza since they control the borders. If you criticized Fatah you are a Hamas supporter –therefore a terrorist and you deserve to suffer.... so no one dared breaking the wall of silence – but we were seething in fear and anger (Personal Communication, January, 22, 2016).

### **GYBO - The Arab Spring and the Palestinian 15 March Movement**

Abu Yazan, the founder of GYBO, told me that their last safe haven where they could conduct fun activities and feel like living a somewhat normal life was Sharek Youth Forum. This was the NGO, which Hamas authorities shut down, in the opening story of this chapter on 30 November 2010. The closure of Sharek was described in their manifesto for change as “The last straw that broke the camel’s back”. Hardwired in their angry manifesto was exactly this accumulation of feelings of despair that this group of young people had been experiencing, but were afraid of expressing publicly for a long time.

In addition to the grueling effect of these local developments in the Gaza Strip, some other under-currents were also evolving. Far from local, these developments were taking place both at a regional and global level. This period coincided with increased access of the digital technologies by Palestinian youth. Official statistics, such as those provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and various providers of

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social media analytics tools for tracking metrics on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube and LinkedIn, and Social Bakers revealed that a solid majority of Palestinian youth was now online. Roughly one million (78% of youth as a demographic group) of this youth population was reported by the same source to be active Internet users.

I explain the online engagement patterns of young Palestinians in chapter 5. But this data is brought here to explain, as indicated by my preliminary analysis, that when the 2011 revolutions took place in Tunisia and Egypt, young Palestinians were online, watching and listening. By that time, the first events of the Arab spring had started in Tunisia (Dec 2010), followed shortly after by the remarkable events of the Tahrir Square and the Egyptian Revolution of 25 January 2011. These were the most profound foundational moments that influenced these young activists in Gaza.

“For the first time, we saw and felt that change was possible. We had a powerful example-right next door,” said Fadi, to me (featured above as one of the activists who gave up his membership with Al Kotla in refusal to the events of 2007). He and most of the activists whose quotes I have referred to in this chapter had been in and out of around 10 youth groups that would temporarily unite around one specific issue and then dissolve again. During that time, although Fadi kept close tabs with a broad network of people, he had noticed a change in his friends’ habits. “Those days, his friends had found a new outlet to talk about their problems, Facebook”. What was amazing to Fadi was not where, but what his friends were discussing: “Less and less, they were complaining about Israel, and more and more about their daily problems. They were angry. With Hamas!” So he was not surprised when he heard of GYBO’s angry manifesto but did not know who its members were. “GYBO had the manifesto only written in English, but also the

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social media tools and the international attention. Our group was already cohesive, had an identity and had a statement, which was: “End the division”. And we had links with all kinds of other groups”.

Yet, unlike the feelings of despair and seething anger in Gaza, a sense of renewed hope rushed over the youth with the winds of change blowing in their region.

By December 2010, the Tunisian revolts had captured the hearts and minds of enthusiastic young Palestinians as well. The numbers of small groups that participated in the youth movements of March 15, 2011 have been often specified as 60 or less. The final numbers of participants in the streets from various media accounts fluctuate between 30,000 to 100,000 participants. From my direct interviews with key organizers of these events, the reasons for such confusion over the number of the groups, their names and their communication with the others, are the following:

The exact number of these online groups was hard to tell because the strategy of these small groups was such that it prevented a clear understanding of the key organizers and the group members. One of the results of continuous communication between various groups in West Bank and Gaza was that many small groups (including GYBO) changed their names to be unified under the “15 March” banner. Others changed their names to “Hirak al Shebabi” (Youth Movement). There were so many groups with the 15 March names at the time that it was hard to tell the difference between one and another. One reason for the groups’ assuming identical names was to avoid surveillance by their own parties and fear of being captured and arrested. When the planned date for the protests grew near, these small-groups merged to form larger networks of hundreds of activists.

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My overall estimation from my 38 interviews in Gaza is that a core group of 200-300 activists successfully organized what is now known as the 15 March Movement.

### **People want the end of the division: the 15 March movement**

As much as the winds of the Arab spring stirred the hopes and dreams of young Palestinians for unity and freedom, they also exposed several contradictions in the Palestinian context, marked by territorial division imposed by the Israel's occupation and internal political oppression caused by the PA in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. One of these contradictions was that for the first time impressive mass mobilizations of young Palestinians were protesting not against Israel's occupation, but against their own political parties.

As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, the 15 March movement was not a single episode happening in one location alone. It was coordinated primarily via social media, between youth groups, living otherwise in geographically separated areas, such as Gaza, the West Bank in the Palestinian territories and Haifa in Israel. For this particular reason, I include in these chapters a few quotes from activists from the West bank, who were coordinating the 15 March movement with the youth groups in Gaza. Their insights will serve here to demonstrate how different their situation was in the West Bank, and how did they actually agree to protests sharing one common banner and one political vision: the end of the division.

This is why, prior to focusing on the evolution of the 15 March movement in Gaza alone; I find it necessary to explain what were the dynamics, goal and demands of the 15 March networked protests in West Bank, Gaza and Haifa. Inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions of 2011, a series of Palestinian youth protests erupted in the

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streets of the West Bank, Gaza and inside Israel. Known as the 15 March movement, these protests were organized by loose networks of independent Palestinian activists and leaderless youth groups unaffiliated with Palestinian political parties.

This massive Palestinian mobilization of the Spring 2011 has also been characterized as a “youth movement”, a generational description that refers to the young initiators of these protests, coming of age during the OSLO historical period. Despite the different organizing strategies and mobilizing modes and different trajectories of evolution in each of these sites of protests, the young activists generally shared a common political demand: “The people want the division (between Fatah and Hamas), to end”.

According to my interviews, both the parties in Gaza and West Bank employed similar tactics to co-opt the movement: first they tried to manipulate and steal the momentum of these spontaneous youth protests. Initially, they infiltrated the members of their own youth wing organization to infiltrate the protests of the young independent Palestinians who had initiated the protest. In Ramallah, the young activists were teased and ridiculed as “NGO kids”, locked up in the “Ramallah bubble” and that they naively believed that “Palestine is a Tahrir Square”.

The clamp down of activists in Gaza, whose crowds they had managed to bring into the streets of Gaza were reported as bigger than those of the West Bank, and was much harsher than the one in the West Bank. Local media reports, and personal interviews with some activists indicated their arrest, torturing and often even threatening with arresting additional family members. Many of the youth in the protests that began on March 15 had previously been affiliated with various political factions, but particularly

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after 2006, a general withdrawal from these parties seemed to become a trend. Some were independent and unaffiliated with any party, but others were affiliated but critical of the existing political framework and rigid ideologies of their Parties.

As a result of these interviews from activists from both the West Bank and Gaza, I learned that “Hirak Al Shebabi in Ramallah, the West Bank, initially generated the statement “End the division”. This was a coalition of politically independent youth, initially conceptualized as an umbrella organization composed of youth affiliated with various political factions and parties, as well as civil society organizations and local groups. They were linked with a network of various small groups spread all over the West Bank and Gaza. Fadi’s group in Gaza was one of them, but Hirak Al Shebabi’s primary center was in the West Bank and they coordinated their events via online platforms such as Facebook and also over mobile phones.

GYBO members were initially not happy with this “End the Division” statement. For that reason, four of the original eight members left their group and they were not alone. My interviews indicate that activists between the West Bank and Gaza were initially divided over the “End the division” statement. The youth in Gaza wanted something completely apolitical, free of parties and their agendas. In his interview with me, Abu Yasan also explained how the initial idea was to come up with a simple slogan for which the movement could be recognized, such as the Egyptian example of “Bread and Freedom”, despite its political undertone that what people there really wanted was to get rid of Mubarak.

Hirak Al Shebabi, with a longer history of formation and a larger network of participants, managed to bring these smaller groups in line with their statement, which

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seemed to resonate even more with a large majority of Palestinian youth who at the time were avidly following with great hopes the unbelievable events of the Arab Spring online. My interviews with various activists reveal that from November to March 15, intense discussion, primarily facilitated by phone calls, and exchanges on Twitter and Facebook took place between these activists. Ibrahim, one of the founders of GYBO, left the group after he realized it was getting too political:

Telling people “Fuck Hamas” and “We want change” is one thing, getting them into the streets is quite another. But telling them what we stand for was much harder than posting a note on Facebook. This much wasn’t even clear to us, the people within the group, so how were we supposed to let youth be part of something we still weren’t clear about? (Personal Communication, September 22, 2012).

This quote illustrates the internal debates between the members of GYBO, with regards to a long-term political vision or a strategy for these groups to rally after. It reveals their uncertainty about what would happen next and how would their lives be directly affected by actions that directly challenged Hamas, the ruling authority of Gaza. At this time one of the interviewees confided in me that she herself did not come from an illustrious family in Gaza, with no clear connections with either Hamas or Fatah.

She told me she was sure that if some of her friends would be arrested, they would be looked after in one way or another. But if she got arrested, she was certain no one would vouch for her. About 6 of the initial members of GYBO told me in their interviews how they scrutinized the real motivations that would enable them to embrace and support this statement. An interesting conclusion that I deduced from these activists in Gaza is that they expected that Hamas would be much harsher on them than the PA would be on activists in the West Bank. It turned out they were right.

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The start of the preparation of smaller youth groups in Gaza for the 15 March protest meant an increased pressure of the big parties and other Palestinian factions, including Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad, and PFLP, to control and direct the scope of the protests. Fear amongst youth groups that these big organizations were infiltrating the independent initiative via their youth members was obvious in daily discussions about the planned scope of the protests. In Abu Yazan's words:

Every one wanted us to do a certain thing- their thing. But we were not them! And we were well enough organized to stick to our own thing. We were just a young group of people who had an idea that resonated really well with other people and who came out onto the street (Personal Communication, January 22, 2016).

The initial confusion, evident in Abu Yasan's quote, is indicative of the traditional parties' infiltrating strategy in order to coopt the movement. As a result of such a strategic move from Hamas authorities in Gaza on 15 March 2011, and also Fatah in the West Bank, something quite unpredictable happened. From a protest against the division, the inspiring movement of a group of courageous youth transformed the street into a battleground of loyalties between parties and these small youth groups. The youth wing organizations of Fatah and Hamas, namely Al Shabiba and Al Kotla, joined the demonstration with their party flags, with an aim to decrease the momentum of a movement free of Parties. This is what Jihane wrote in her blog, when narrating the events of that day:<sup>43</sup>

Right there, we witnessed something unforgettable: Some youth members of Al Kotla revealed that their loyalty was above all to their party, not to Palestine. So did Al Shabiba! Right there in the street, so many of us became very territorial in

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<sup>43</sup> In her blog, Palinoja, Jihane, wrote in detail about the cooptation of the protest by the parties and various factions .  
<https://palinoia.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/march-15th-movement-statement/>

our thinking – and it was very difficult to tell who was who within the movement because it suddenly became a chaos (Blog Post, 15 March 2011).

Jihane's quote illustrates how the 15 March movement revealed the overlapping loyalties of some youth crowds who had initially joined the movement as independents. But it also demonstrates how the protests helped also those who were distrustful towards these parties to permanently rupture their bond with official parties and organizations. I heard from another interviewee, how he saw with his own eyes how Hamas was only arresting those who were carrying the Palestinian Flag, as opposed to those who were carrying the Hamas flag. Among my interviews, 70% of them were directly arrested, jailed and tortured after the 15 March movement. A few weeks after the 15 March movement, the founder of GYBO and some other key activists left the Gaza Strip in fear for their lives. While some returned, others did not.

### **The forgotten revolution**

“How did people so easily forget our revolution?” wonders Asmaa, while talking to me about the relationship between social media, the Arab Spring and the abrupt end of the 15 March movement in Gaza. “How could they? They talk more about the tools than our ideas, our courage. They talk about our failure, but we brought tens of thousands of young people into the street. Yes, we did not unite the Parties or bring change, but how could we? We had nothing- just social media to coordinate and our courage and conviction to make it happen in the streets. They had everything: guns, party members and resources. That became clear in the street. This is why, we did not fail that day; we succeeded. But people forget or are too quick to criticize our efforts without knowing much about our situation”.

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Scholars mostly criticized the heavy reliance of these groups on social media rather than traditional methods of organizing, while public intellectuals criticized their lack of organization and leadership. Some attributed this movement to the fragmented and depoliticized reality of the Palestinian youth that came to age during the OSLO period. Others questioned its relevance, given that it was not addressed against the occupation, but against the Palestinian political institutions. In interviews with some of these public intellectuals, I did notice a certain dismissal when I pressed for answers regarding these youth protests of 2011. One of them told me how irrelevant these youth groups were if they did not truly affect neither the relations between parties, nor the broader dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Another pointed to their disconnection, or lack of roots with broad-based, grassroots movements outside of the urban areas of Gaza and the West Bank.

Still, for these activists the lessons of the 15 March movement and their take on the political organizing seemed very disconnected from the analysis of their traditional leader and think tanks. Repeatedly, I heard through these interviews what they learned from that movement. According to them, their lessons from the 15 March movement in Gaza, and their perspective as young people who were directly involved, has never been discussed. And they learned a lot.

As I spoke with Abu Yazan, about this topic, I noticed a deep sadness in his eyes as he tried to explain why their movement in Gaza, was quickly forgotten:

All these professors, leaders, influential people, they look down on us. They are so fixed on their chairs, positions, functions, that they don't care what we say, where we say it and how. This is the problem. They don't see us. They don't recognize us (Personal Communication, January 22, 2016).

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Another key-leader of the 15 March movement in the West Bank shared with me a similar conclusion:

Every one pointed at our mistakes. The political leaders said: “Oh, what is it that they want exactly? And what are these protests and what is their effect on the ground? This is useless!” And the Western media said: “they should do X and follow that path like Martin Luther King.” The academics said: “they need to define a goal. They don’t have a strategy”. Everyone suggested a recipe! But really, everything new we learned was thanks to our “mistakes” (Personal Communication, November, 5, 2015).

Maryam B, shared with me more or less the same frustration: “The older generations came and told us “What you are doing is stupid”. She told me how in terms of political activism she and her friends learned it on their own. For most of these activists what they learned by organizing this movement on their own without parties was something quite new for the traditional forms of political organizing in the West Bank and Gaza. According to Maryam, the simple truth she learned after the failure of the 15 March movement was indeed liberating “We don’t need your acceptance”.

For this group of activists, the 15 March movement remains a strong indicator of the phase in which the Palestinian youth were at the time: stripping themselves of their political past, away from members of parties and transforming into networked individuals. This, in their words, seems to be a process, primarily facilitated by the social media and not older structures of parties.

Finally, the 15 March movement can also be seen as changing the perception of the political behavior of Palestinian Youths as people affiliated with existing political bodies. The bitter battle over the narrow partisan affiliations entrenching the internal Palestinian division definitely weakened the mobilizing potential of the PA in the West bank and Hamas in Gaza, and weakened the PLO. Despite its co-optation, the 15 March

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movement marked the first public rebellion against such narrow affiliations and expressed the need to reinforce national as opposed to partisan attachments.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The results of my 38 in depth interviews with activists from Gaza, as well as data collected from 2011-2012, lead me to the following conclusions for this chapter. The 15 March movement was the first indicator of an independent and networked youth movement in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and inside Israel. Emboldened by the ongoing events of the Arab Spring, a group of networked young Palestinians overcame the fear and took to the streets to protest against their own authoritarian structures: Hamas in Gaza and the PA (Palestinian Authority) in the West Bank.

Social media provided at the time the only free space uncontrolled by the government and other institutional actors that these activists relied upon. In addition, a sense of withdrawal from party politics seemed to particularly increase after the 2007 internal war between Hamas and Fatah. In fear for the “official political”, as demonstrated by the loyalty to one or another Palestinian faction, these activists turned to their digital networks every time a daily problem disrupted their troubled lives.

It is there where the sentiments of despair against authorities were initially fermented. GYBO’s manifesto resonated so well with Gazan and international audiences, mainly because it was the first overt public rejection of the ruling Authority of Gaza - Hamas. Similarly, the youth groups from the West Bank appeared to be disillusioned from the economic policies of the PA as well as their brutal crush of every pro-Hamas solidarity protest in the West bank.

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Still, amidst these networks of despair and cynicism, a new emotional sentiment was sparked by the Arab popular movements of 2011.

Inspired by events of the Arab Spring, they were more hopeful and optimistic when they joined the movement. These combined sentiments of hope and sorrow, shared primarily online at a historical political moment for the region, culminated in organized action in the street. Hardwired into the new demands of the 15 March movement from the start was the major tension that sparked the events of the Arab uprisings of 2011. Today, based on my interviews with those directly involved in such protests, the youth activists believe that the one demand that brought these groups together - the people want the end of the division - it also became one element, which contributed to the quick dissolution of their movement.

The Parties easily crushed the movement by infiltrating their own youth crowds into the streets, attacking the activists by targeting their elitist and NGO roots. Similar dominant formal movements criticized these activists for wrongly blaming the Palestinian parties alone without mentioning Israel's occupation. Viewed in this way, the story of the 15 March movement in Gaza and the West Bank may be seen as the story of youth groups, which failed in achieving the unity of their Parties as a result of the lack of leadership, political experience and long-term strategy.

Yet, my interviews lead me to conclude that despite its ultimate failure to affect the unity of the Parties, this movement also marks the onset of a group of Palestinian youths' search for an alternative path for justice, freedom and dignity. As a result, instead of achieving the end of the division, this movement signaled instead the

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permanent strategic rupture between this emerging group of actors and their traditional parties.

Through a strategy of shaming their political actors online, a rising network of young activists stripped away their own political affiliations. Such a rupture was an indicator of increased attempts from these activists to be recognized as different from the dominant organizations and their ideological agendas in an evolving Palestinian context. GYBO's formational dynamics and their relations with other similar leaderless youth groups in Gaza and West Bank unravel both the limits and potential of social media for activism in the Gaza strip, but also the conditions that enabled the sudden evolution of small and leaderless youth groups like GYBO, in Gaza, into a broad-based youth mobilization.

While the 15 March movement in Gaza had its own trajectory of evolution, it also revealed the courage of a few youth groups to amalgamate and challenge their authority, despite Hamas's rule with an iron fist since 2006. Despite their arrest, threats and at times surveillance, these groups managed to pull off the biggest youth mobilization in Gaza, at least in the last decade.

Finally, a set of mobilizing characteristics present in their movements is worth summarizing here for two reasons: First, they appeared similar to the youth protests ongoing at the wake of the Arab Spring at the time. Second, they also appeared to be in alignment with the mobilizing patterns of the youth in the West Bank, despite their demographical segregation and political fragmentation. In addition, the lack of party affiliation and the initiation of such protests, primarily on online digital networks, serve to connect these Palestinian protests of 2011 with an array of newer contemporary youth

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mobilization in this digital age across the world. Despite its containment, and despite the major contextual limitations in the context of Gaza Strip, the 15 March movement in Gaza indicated the potential of a network of activists whose ability to connect online and act on the street weakened the abilities of their Parties to effectively organize and direct them in support of their formal ideological agendas.

### **Chapter Three: At a Crossroads in the West Bank: In Search of a Lost Strategy**

On November 2011, Mazin Qumsyeh, Associate Professor at Bethlehem University, received a phone call from a student at Bir Zeit University, near Ramallah, West Bank. As the student briefly explained the reason for his phone call, Professor Qumsyeh<sup>44</sup> listened carefully.

The student introduced himself as a founding member of the youth group “Palestinians For Dignity” (PFD). This was a group which had risen out of a complex network of acephalous youth groups. Against the backdrop of the historical events of the Arab Spring (2011), it was one of the groups that had organized the 15 March Youth Movement. This movement consisted of a series of massive Palestinian youth protests in the streets of the West Bank, Gaza and inside Israel, sharing one core political demand: “The people want the division (between Fatah and Hamas), to end”.

These same activists had now merged into this newly formalized network, called “Palestinians for Dignity,” moving past their previous but failed attempts through the 15 March movement (2011) to achieve unity between the two main Palestinian political factions - Fatah and Hamas.

In his interview with me, Qumsyeh told me how the students’ intention was to organize a new and different type of protest from the 15 March movement, called “Palestinian Freedom Rides.” He had secured the participation of a close network of friends and activists, including the online support of many Palestinian and international activists. He also spoke to a group of social media savvy supporters who were prepared to

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<sup>44</sup> His most recent book on this topic is called “Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment” (Qumsyeh, 2015).

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live stream the whole campaign online. No political parties were informed or involved in the planned activity.

Professor Qumsyeh thought that was a great idea and encouraged the student to do it, but the persistent 23-year-old student had not quite finished his thought and had another request. Qumsyeh was well known both in the Palestinian community, and also internationally, as a tireless and courageous activist in the field of Palestinian Human Rights. The student proceeded to ask Qumsyeh if he would personally be willing to participate in the Freedom Rides campaign.

At the other end of the line, as he thanked professor Qumsyeh for lending his support and agreeing to participate in the campaign, the Bir Zeit student<sup>45</sup> smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. He had just received his fifth and final confirmation. Four other renowned Palestinian civil disobedience activists from various cities in the West Bank had also agreed to participate. The sixth participant was going to be Fadi Quran<sup>46</sup>, the originator of the idea for the Palestinian Freedom Rides Campaign. The idea for the campaign had occurred to this young man while reading the news headlines in the American media. It was the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides in 1961 when civil rights activists launched a series of bus trips through the American South to protest segregation in bus terminals.

Badia, an activist from Hebron, also loved the idea and agreed to be one of the original six Palestinian Freedom Riders. When I spoke with Badia<sup>47</sup>, he told me that he

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45 In my personal communication with prof. Qumsyeh, he did not reveal the name of the student. I found out through a different interview, but the student requested that his source remain anonymous.

46 Interview with Fadi Quran, November 6, 2015.

47 Interview with Badia Dwaik, November 16, 2015

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had particularly liked how everything had been planned in such a way, and that all the details of this “Palestinian Freedom Riders” campaign were to be kept completely secret until the moment of its launch. The element of surprise caught his imagination.

Boarding the bus was Huwaida Arraf, a well-known Palestinian political activist born in Israel, and a previous organizer and participant in the Free Gaza Movement<sup>48</sup> and International Solidarity Movement (ISM).<sup>49</sup> In her interview with me<sup>50</sup>, she said that she knew the organizers of the campaign very well, since she had been an active participant in the founding discussions of the Palestinians for Dignity network. “Since then something exciting, persistent, youthful and genuine was taking place in Palestine- and although I couldn’t just yet name it, I wanted to be a part of it.”

On November 15, 2011 at 10am, this small group of Palestinian activists carried out the Palestinian Freedom Rides campaign. In all, six individuals directly participated as bus riders, four of whom I met with and interviewed. The following is a combined description of their recollections on that event. That morning, just outside of Psagot, an Israeli settlement southeast of Ramallah in the West Bank, the group boarded a bus bound for Jerusalem, which some of the activists are barred from entering without an Israeli permit.

Each of the members of the contingent was dressed in black and white t-shirts with slogans such as: “we shall overcome”, “dignity”, “freedom” and “justice.”<sup>51</sup> Every activist had a small camera attached to their clothing, aiming to record and stream the whole event as it happened. Back in Ramallah, a group of savvy media people was ready

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48 <http://www.freegaza.org>

49 <https://palsolidarity.org>

50 Interview with Huwaida Arraf, October 22, 2015

51 <http://mondoweiss.net/2011/11/follow-the-freedom-rides/>

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to stream what was recorded live, online. The campaign had its own Facebook<sup>52</sup> and Twitter pages<sup>53</sup> as well as a blog.<sup>54</sup>

After hours of waiting, the six riders finally managed to board a bus. As they were climbing the steps of the bus, one freedom rider from Hebron, attempting to get money out of his pocket for the bus ticket, instead pulled out his Palestinian ID. As soon as the bus driver saw the green Palestinian ID, he told them: “you’re not allowed to get on the bus, go back down”. Instead, the riders all walked on board and found seats, shocking the bus’s driver and the other passengers. Fadi Quran got a book out of his computer bag. As they rode, he began reading the classic novel “Great Expectations” by Charles Dickens.

As the bus drove off toward Jerusalem, four Israeli military vehicles surrounded it. When they reached the Hizma checkpoint, on the northern outskirts of Jerusalem, the bus was stopped. Hours passed, with the freedom riders left alone inside of the bus. Finally, as it grew darker, four soldiers boarded the bus and announced that they were all under arrest. One by one, the soldiers hauled the group off. The freedom riders, refusing to leave their seats, were hit, pushed to the ground, and kicked repeatedly in the stomach. As the soldiers were dragging him out, Professor Qumsyeh couldn’t help but draw a broad smile. Although beaten, bruised and arrested, Professor Qumsyeh was smiling. He was happy! The next day, the freedom riders were hailed as courageous activists who

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/PalestinianFreedomRides/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://twitter.com/PalFreedomRides>

<sup>54</sup> <http://palfreedomrides.blogspot.co.il/2011/11/palestinian-freedom-riders-on-their-way.html?view=classic>

disrupted the settlement process in the West Bank, albeit for just 10 hours, by interfering with their transportation system operation<sup>55</sup>. Major international newspapers covered the event, while images of the activists being dragged out of the bus went viral and their Facebook and twitter campaign attracted enormous traffic.<sup>56</sup>

“The Freedom Riders” is an example of a new and successful protest, engaging both online and offline tactics of mobilization that “Palestinians for dignity” organized as part of a sustained chain of youth protests that took place between 2011-2013. In this case, the campaign challenged the occupation and expansion of settlements in the West Bank. While the novelty of the idea to connect the Palestinian Freedom Riders with the African American Civil Rights movement gained the support of the core participants, the secrecy surrounding the organizing details of the campaign caught the Israeli military by surprise.

The online streaming and broad coverage of the event led to the involvement of the controversial BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement, which utilized the campaign to advocate for and succeed in the divestment by “Veolia”, a French company that previously ran the bus-transportation system for Israeli settlers throughout the West Bank.<sup>57</sup> Over a three-year period, the activists of the PFD network managed to organize roughly 100 similar campaigns, engaging online and offline audiences, attracting media attention with their new forms of activism, and surprising both Israelis and Palestinian

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<sup>55</sup> Available at : <https://electronicintifada.net/content/us-south-palestine-freedom-rides-change-history/10599>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/15/palestinians-protest-racist-bus-policy>  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/palestinian-freedom-riders-arrested-on-bus-to-jerusalem/2011/11/15/gIQAQfkPN\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/palestinian-freedom-riders-arrested-on-bus-to-jerusalem/2011/11/15/gIQAQfkPN_story.html)

<sup>57</sup> <https://bdsmovement.net/news/bds-marks-another-victory-veolia-sells-all-israeli-operations>

officials with their sites and targets of their protests.<sup>58</sup> In these campaigns, activists marched on Israeli checkpoints to challenge the occupation and expansion of settlements in the West Bank, while also occupying the main squares and streets of the West Bank to protest the repressive policies of the governing Palestinian Authority.

Despite the success and frequency of these events, in 2014, just three years after its establishment, the founding activists of the movement formally known as “Palestinians for Dignity” decided to permanently dissolve their group - returning instead to their loose and informal social networks. Why did “Palestinians for Dignity” break up and what caused the abrupt end to a successful series of youth-led protests lead by this group?

Substantial literature on the evolving nature of social movements in the region of the Middle East examined new forms of protest and youth activism, particularly evident in the Arab Spring events (Beinin & Vairel 2011; Khalaf & Khalaf, 2011, Khatib and Lust 2014; Bayat 2010 and 2014; Herrera 2014). Yet, while reviewing the literature on the Palestinian forms of these newer protests, I noticed how they are studied as isolated cases of Palestinian youth activism, confined to their geographically separated areas and largely fading in the broader political field of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Hilal, 2010; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015, Burton, 2017). In addition, these newer Palestinian forms of movements tend to be examined primarily through the historic lenses of Palestinian youth activism against Israel’s Occupation of the Palestinian Territories. As such, they tend to

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<sup>58</sup> I calculated this number through my personal research, amid various social media platforms where these events were announced and coordinated. I also followed their coverage through some independent online media news forums, such as Electronic Intifada, Mondoweiss and +972. Through these online media sources, I sought to trace the frequency and duration of their protests. I also counted these events listed at the “Chronology”, Journal of Palestine Studies.<sup>58</sup> Finally I combined these findings with their local and international coverage in mainstream media. Therefore I believe this number represents an accurate estimate.

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fizzle out against the familiar backdrop of Palestinian collective resistance, such as the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the Second Intifada (2000-2005).

For example, some scholars have argued that these newer forms of Palestinian movements should be analyzed in the unique context of the “Palestinian condition” (Hillal 2011, Hoigilt 2013). According to them, in order to make sense of today’s youth movements and their mobilizing for political protest,<sup>59</sup> it is more apt to compare them with what happened before and during the Intifadas of 1987 and 2000. By focusing primarily in the historical context of Palestinian youth activism, scholars might miss examining the formational dynamics of these newer youth networks in the contemporary context of networked social movements.

Palestinians for Dignity is a case that intends to fill that gap, given the significant number and the success of their protests carried on throughout a continuous period of three years between 2011 and 2014. My analysis in this chapter will demonstrate the sustained mobilizing efforts of a core network of activists behind a seemingly isolated cycle of Palestinian youth protests between 2011-2013.

In my efforts to trace the trajectories of their protests and campaigns, I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 activists. I focused on the personal stories of their political involvement, and on the reasons they abandoned the group and cut any formal ties with its members in 2014. While meeting with them, I discovered how complex their ties with

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<sup>59</sup> Hoigilt, J. (2013) The Palestinian spring that was not: the youth and political activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories . Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 4

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existing grassroots movements were and how their sites of protests expanded across the West Bank. This was particularly interesting, because most analysis on newer forms of Palestinian activism has primarily referred to the 15 March movement and what came after as primarily isolated cases of Ramallah based activism (Farsakh, 2011). In reality, only after a few interviews in the fancy cafes of Ramallah, I drove across towns and villages in the West Bank to talk directly with 22 activists. Some of the places I drove to were Hebron; Israeli settlements such as Gush Etzyon, NGO offices in Bethlehem and Jerusalem; the student campus at Bir Zeit University and Bethlehem University.

I argue that behind the static realities of external and internal Palestinian politics lays an informal network of activists, which grows increasingly aware of its power to organize and act outside of their controlling structures. The analysis of the PFD as a case of West Bank youth activism, indicates how the limitations posed by current political factors on the ground pushed these activists to innovate and seek novel alternative actions. These include decentralized actions coordinated on the ground with grassroots neighborhood or village committees, while facilitating inner-communication, as well as exposure to the outside world primarily via social media.

The analysis in this chapter also leads me to argue that as a result of increased oppression by two systems of control: the Palestinian Authority (PA) and continuing Israel's military occupation, these activists have abandoned the long-term pursuit of a formalized strategy as set by their official parties. Instead, they calculate the effects of their campaigns to be not so long lasting, but rather quick and shocking to both of the systems of control in place.

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To properly understand the formational dynamics of the PFD, I include contextual factors that determined the ebbs and flows of Palestinian politics from 2006-2011. First I examine the main reasons that led to the disenchantment of this group of youth with their Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Second, I include in my analysis the effects of regional development that created a sense of hope (the Arab Spring) –evidenced in a similar youth movement in the West Bank: The 15 March Movement. Third, I examine the implicit ways in which the trajectories of activism of the PFD, intertwined with those of grassroots forms of activism, known as Palestinian Popular Resistance. Finally, understanding the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is paramount to understanding and analyzing the current efforts of these networks of action.

As such, an account of three major historic developments leading up to the present is necessary. This will focus on the First Intifada, The Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada. Although these historical junctures are not the focus of my study, they serve as a historical backdrop and add context to the analysis of the emergence of these newer forms of horizontally networked activism.

I will narrate most of these transformational phases of PFD through personal stories of the many activists I interviewed. Below I use real names for those who agreed, and pseudonyms for others who preferred to remain anonymous.

### **“This Kind of Politics”: The West Bank Youth’s disillusion with the PA**

When we met, her demeanor was very polite, yet reserved and somewhat suspicious. As soon as she sat down, she said to me:

This is just a chat, not an interview. I’ve never been a member of any party or

any organization affiliated with parties. I no longer belong to this youth group that you want to discuss. I speak only for myself. My individual initiatives have no political motivation (Personal Communication, October 29, 2015).

Noor, now 26 years old, had agreed to talk to me about her role as a key organizer of the 15 March Movement in 2011. She was also a key participant in the founding discussions of the PFD network later that year. Yet, to her mind, as articulated in her quotation above, these activities had nothing to do with parties and were not political. Noor was not alone in this regard.

At this point of my interviewing work, I could not help but notice a recurrent theme in these unprompted introductory comments from my interviewees, a sort of rush to admit to not being affiliated with any political group and not being active in any form of politically motivated action. Yet, soon after, their personal life stories unfolded in front of me, presenting quite a different reality. First, most had been brought up in highly politically active families, loyal to one party, either Fatah or Hamas. That, in addition to their accounts about participation in political demonstrations in Palestinian public universities overflowing with green or yellow flags, massive portraits and banners of one political leader or another further illustrated an orientation to the political. In short, while insisting in being apolitical, their personal life stories indicated that most had grown up in highly politicized environments.

Noor's quotation captures the paradox of having no interest in political activism, despite being brought up in highly politicized environment. This paradox is also present in scholarly literature covering the political activism of Palestinian youth. Scholars agree

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with the characterization of Palestinian youth as highly politicized due to their role as the vanguard of popular uprisings against the Israeli Occupation, particularly dominant during the First Intifada (Kuttab, 1988; Barber, 2001, Lockman & Beinin, 1999; Sayigh, 1993; Beitler, 2004; Collins 2004; 2011, Jensen, 2005; Hart, 2002, 2008).

These studies describe Palestinian Youth having traditionally been at the forefront of political action and change. Still, the portrayal of the heroism of Palestinian youth in past uprisings somehow faded away, particularly during the second Intifada (Pressman, 2006). In its place, a quite different narrative unfolds: the portrayal of Palestinian youth as highly fragmented, de-politicized and disenchanted with their parties and leaders (Sayre & Al-Botmeh, 2010; Christophersen, Hoigilt, & Tiltnes, 2011; Sharek, 2011, 2013; AWRAD 2011,2013, FAFO 2011,2013; Allen, 2013; Casati, 2016).

Against this backdrop, Noor's story starts making sense. She was born in 1990 in Nablus, a city located in the Northern West Bank. Through her detailed account, she indicated an acute awareness of her city and colleges' strong political legacy. She told me that Nablus, historically known as Palestine's commercial heart, also carries a reputation of being the center of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation (Doumani, 2004); Leech, 2012). Likewise, Al Najah University, where she studied, also had a long history of demonstrations and resistance. In alignment with Noor's account, the role of the higher educational institutions as forums for propagation of Palestinian youth 'political consciousness' is a well-established scholarly conclusion (Taraki, 1990; Johnson & Kuttab 2001).

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But, by the time Noor started college, she had experienced a different political reality. During her high school years, the Second Intifada had turned her city into a strong resistance bed against the Israeli Occupation. Nablus at the time was known as a strong base of Hamas supporters. Noor, herself coming from a Fatah-leaning family, had lost a cousin as the militarized second Intifada grew very violent. By the time she went to college in 2007, Noor had experienced the division between the two main political Parties (Fatah and Hamas) and the bloody internal conflict that came afterwards in a concrete way at her own campus. This experience shook her faith in political parties dramatically.

On 24 July 2007, violent demonstrations broke out in the An- Najah University in Nablus, culminated in the killing of a male student, a supporter of the Islamic Bloc - the youth wing associated with Hamas at Al Najah. The Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights published a report on the killing, stressing that 'the events must be viewed within the overall struggle between Fatah and Hamas' (PICCR, 2007: 2; PCHR, 2010). This fact had rocked her university years. According to Noor, this incident left a clear mark on Al Najah University students' activities and also on her own political consciousness. She acknowledged that, at the center of this consciousness, welled up a strong aversion to memberships or association with any political party. In her case, rejection of the PA, the Fatah party and their youth wing, Al Shabiba. As she told me:

It was this environment that prompted me to stay out of it, out of *this kind of politics* - from the very beginning. I really had no other choice. The one choice I had - Al Shabiba was being forced on me. So I rejected it. This is the reason why I started to participate in other activities, outside of the sphere of Parties (Personal Communication. October 29, 2015).

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“This kind of politics!” I had heard this expression so many times by so many young people I had met all over the West Bank (and Gaza). Whenever I would hear this combination of words, I would also notice how it triggered an almost acute allergic-like reaction on my interviewee’s facial expressions. Here it was again, as Noor spoke about the internal division between Hamas and Fatah: She shook her head slowly, pressed her dense dark curly hair against her scalp, pursed her lips, while rubbing her eyes nervously. Her body language spoke of discomfort, reluctance to speak but also transmitted to me a sense of fear and sadness.

“This kind of politics”, was a certain resignation signature in their story of disassociation with parties, particularly exacerbated in the Hamas-Fatah split in 2007. It captured the idea that more than “disassociation from politics”, Noor and her friend were making a choice. This choice, which involved active withdrawal from the political rivalries between the two main Palestinian parties, Fatah and Hamas, is backed by statistics as well.

A 2011 survey by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research revealed that over 62% of West Bank residents were afraid of criticizing the PA. In a Fafo<sup>60</sup> poll conducted from 2006-2011, only 8% of Palestinian youth said they had confidence in the political parties, and 12% in the PNC (the Palestinian Parliament). It is in this context that I situate Noor’s personal story and analyze the expressions of disengagement of the activists from the politics of their Parties. Following is a quick account of the political trajectory of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, after the unexpected results of

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<sup>60</sup> Institute for Applied Research

the 2006 parliamentary elections, and subsequent civil war in 2007. This West Bank context description serves to show how it defined these activists' mobilization modes, as a result of increased authoritarianism and ruthless suppression of local internal political dissent.

### **The PA's Rule in the West Bank: 2007-2011**

On 15 June 2007, after the brief civil war that split the Palestinian Authority in two, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas appointed Salam Fayyad as leader of an emergency Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank. In my previous chapter, I focused on what the takeover of the Gaza Strip, by Hamas, meant in terms of political and economic consequences for the Gaza people: their suffering under harsh international sanctions, repeated conflicts with the IDF and Israeli and Egyptian blockade leading to Gaza's economic collapse.

In sharp contrast with the desperation and devastation of the population in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, an "economic miracle"<sup>61</sup> known as "Fayyadism"<sup>62</sup> was taking place in the West Bank. In Ramallah, Prime Minister Fayyad was throwing a celebratory party<sup>63</sup> promising a Palestinian State in the West Bank by 2011. The PA strategy was grand in its ambitions and expensive: It involved building democratic and transparent institutions, fighting corruption, fostering economic growth and declaring a Palestinian

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61 Available at : [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/opinion/26goldberg.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/opinion/26goldberg.html?_r=0)

62 The term "Fayyadism" was coined by Friedman who wrote in 2009, "Fayyad's is based on the simple but all-too-rare notion that an Arab leader's legitimacy should be based not on slogans or rejectionism or personality cults or security services, but on delivering transparent, accountable administration and services." The term also refers to Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's program to build a Palestinian state despite occupation and internal division.

63 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/salam-fayyads-cynical-party/7530>

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State (Brown, 2010; Khalidi & Sobhi, 2011; Simanovsky, 2011; Leech 2012; Knutter, 2013).

In December 2007, Fayyad's government proposed the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), a program based on "rebuilding Palestinian national institutions" and "developing the Palestinian public and private sectors".<sup>64</sup> Other reports and proposals with catchy titles such as "Palestine: Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State" (2009), "Homestretch to Freedom" (2010), kept promoting Fayyad's intention to declare a Palestinian state in 2011 based on the June 4, 1967 borders.<sup>65</sup> The Fayyad Plan gained tremendous support from Western powers.<sup>66</sup> Congress approved a \$200-million deposit into the PA treasury. Meanwhile, donor funding to PA coffers increased to \$1.5 billion annually beginning in 2007. Economic growth experienced during 2009 and 2010 in the West Bank was heralded as a sign of the first green shoots of the PA strategy<sup>67</sup>.

But, beneath the fanfare of Fayyadism or the economic effects of the PA strategy, a thick shroud of control and arrests enveloped the West Bank, dubbed by some scholars

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64 Palestinian National Authority. National Development Plan 2011-2013: Establishing the State, Building our Future. Palestinian National Authority, 2011.

65 Palestinian National Authority. Palestinian Reform and Development Plan: 2008-2010. Palestinian National Authority, 2008.

66 Friedman, Thomas. "Green Shoots in Palestine," The New York Times. August 4, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/opinion/05friedman.html>

67 Friedman, Thomas. "Green Shoots in Palestine," The New York Times. August 4, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/opinion/05friedman.html>

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as “politics of fear”.<sup>68</sup> While some scholars noted the economic growth as a positive aspect of such reform (Knutter, 2013); Simanovsky, 2011), others focused on the increase of authoritarian context in which these reforms were undertaken (Brown, 2010).

In his article, “Fayyad Is Not the Problem, but Fayyadism Is Not the Solution to Palestine’s Political Crisis”, Brown (2010, September) noted how the reform agenda was also built on the intra-Palestinian split, creating disincentives for reconciliation. The new PA security regime has been marked by domestic policing, effective containment of internal political opponents, an increased authoritarian stance accompanied by increasing incidents of torture, intimidation, and repression of civil rights of the PA’s opponents.

Human rights violations appeared as another contradiction of the PA’s neoliberal agenda and its emphasis on “the rule of law” (Sayigh 2011; Allen 2015). In a report prepared by the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) in April 2010, the government of Israel reported that in 2009, Israeli and Palestinian military forces coordinated 1,297 operations, amounting to a 72% increase compared to 2008. A year later, the same report indicated that in 2010<sup>69</sup> Israeli and Palestinian military forces coordinated 2,968 operations, amounting to a 118% increase compared to 2009<sup>70</sup>.

In his study, “Policing the People, Building the State: Authoritarian Transformation in the West Bank and Gaza”, Sayigh described security reforms as being

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68 <https://electronicintifada.net/content/politics-fear/7168>

69 Measures Taken by Israel in Support of Developing the Palestinian Economy, the Socio-Economic Structure, and the Security Reforms. Report of the Government of Israel to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, State of Israel, 2010.

70 Measures Taken by Israel in Support of Developing the Palestinian Economy, the Socio-Economic Structure, and the Security Reforms. Report of the Government of Israel to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, State of Israel, 2011.

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authoritarian in nature that will threaten both long-term Palestinian security and the ability to achieve a recognized Palestinian state. From January through September 2011, the ICHR reported 91 complaints of torture and 479 complaints of arbitrary arrests. Further, in 2011 and 2012, PA security forces arbitrarily prevented or violently dispersed nonviolent Palestinian protests and detained, and at times physically injured, journalists covering the events, particularly at events critical of the PA or supportive of Hamas.

These trends and structures, the increased authoritarianism of the PA with the West Bank, and its increased security coordination with the State of Israel, shaped most of the experiences and stories of the activists that I interviewed. It is here where the term “This kind of politics” originates and where the disengagement from the Party politics starts becoming a trend.

I have shown in this part of my study how an increased repression and reduction of political space in the West Bank during 2007-2011 influenced young people like Noor to become jaded to existing Palestinian political parties. Noor, her city and her university, exemplify what “being depoliticized” meant to the majority of Palestinian youth born around the 1990s: an increased withdrawal from political rivalries for fear of being caught in between them. Additionally, they felt a feeling of alienation from the PA’s increased security coordination with Israel.

The combined effect on the mobilizing patterns of these youth was their disenchantment with parties, and their search for alternative forms of engagement in more decentralized forms of grassroots activism. In addition to these Palestinian realities on the ground, a historic tide of event, known as the Arab Spring, swept through the

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region of the Middle East. What follows is an account of how this regional aspect deeply affected mobilization modes and the strategic targets of these activists.

### **Politics of Fear - Networks of Hope: The Arab Spring in the West Bank**

It was amidst this particular West Bank environment that Noor and her friends witnessed another historic moment, the Arab Spring. Like her peers, Noor views this event as one of the most inspiring moments of her life:

When I saw with my own eyes how the foundations of systems and people who we thought to be indestructible, crumbled and shattered under popular pressure, I was deeply inspired and hopeful that we, the people, could affect change as well. It changed what I believed about power and politics, forever (Personal Communication, January 2016).

The same feeling of empowerment and inspiration evident in Noor's quotation was transmitted to me in other interviews in different ways. The Arab Spring, the era of "power of the people" (Ghonim 2012), coupled with the discourse of "liberation technology" (Lynch 2007, 2012; Howard 2010; Howard & Hussain 2013; Diamond & Plattner 2012), sparked in Noor and her peers a renewed sense of hope for positive change. Increased levels of Internet access and the emergence of new models of organizing, facilitated primarily by social media online, had challenged the concepts and practices of activism in this digital revolutionary age, even under the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (Khatib & Lust, 2014; Herrera 2015).

When Arab youth used Facebook and Twitter as organizing tools for political change, a significant majority of Palestinian youth was paying attention. Roughly one million (78% of West Bank youth as a demographic group) of them were active Internet

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users (OVBS 2011). Facebook penetration by Palestinian users reached 1million in 2012, with 18-24 year olds as the largest age group (487,280 users), followed by 25-34 year olds.<sup>71</sup>

I tried to make sense of these numbers by engaging in an online content analysis of the engagement patterns of this entire group of Palestinian Internet users. My initial research, conducted online during my PhD training years at the University of Washington between 2013-14, included evaluation of about 400 online sources (200 Facebook pages, 200 Blogs / Tweets of Palestinian youth mostly in Arabic, but English too, reaching an audience of about 400,000 Palestinian users). I wanted to first understand how this information structure affected the capacity of Palestinian youth to consume and produce information online. I particularly focused on two digital platforms: Facebook and Blogs. The owners of these FB pages and bloggers were from both the West Bank and Gaza and ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old.

This content analysis on the Palestinian digital communication pattern lead me to two conclusions. The first conclusion was that as a result of a growing regional information infrastructure and with the large majority of users present online, Palestinian youth skills to consume and produce content online also grew significantly. The second conclusion that I reached was the particular effect of the blogosphere in the ability of young Palestinians to find and express their own voice through alternative mediums of expression such as blogs. The bloggers were inter-connected, speakers of Arabic and

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71 Evidence in a recent report on social media in the West Bank and Gaza Strip found that 40% of the Palestinian population there are active on social-media sites, most notably Facebook (Spark, 2013). Statistics reveal that the annual rate of increase for Facebook and Twitter users in Palestine in 2012-2013 was the highest of the Arab countries, an astonishing 232%

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English, promoting issues they feel passionate about, creating, sharing and consuming information both political and personal.

During my fieldwork in 2015, I interviewed some of these bloggers that I had been following from 2011-2014. I had noticed how for some time now they were personalizing their grievances primarily online, the most acute one being the disavowal of their emotional bonds with their current ruling elites, and dismissal of rigid ideological frames in which they have no say.

In short, these broad numbers and statistics indicated that an emerging network of Palestinian Youth was connecting with each other online. And when the torrent of the events of the Arab Spring exploded, the political demands of their Arab peers offered an outlet for these youth groups to stir something deeply missing in the political foundation of Palestinian national bodies, participatory democratic mobilization (Khalil, 2013; Herrera 2013). The decentralized nature of new technologies enabled youth groups to create and share their own narrative, and their original voices, with a local and international audience.

One of these voices was Maryam B, 17 years old. Until 2011, she had never been to a youth demonstration before. Maryam studies English Literature and languages at Bir Zeit University, and is a freelance blogger and writer for many online news outlets, as well as an ex-member of Palestinians for Dignity.

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Let's be real: social media empowered us. It enabled us to express our thoughts. It enabled us to find people who share our same thoughts. And it connected us in ways that were never possible before. For example: a certain collection of activists from Ramallah would coordinate with a certain collection of activists from Nablus. And all of us were coordinating online with Palestinians from abroad and international activists from all over the world. That was the beginning of a network and community organizing (Personal Communication, November 6, 2015).

Through her quote above, Maryam articulates how she and her Palestinian peers felt about these new tools and the ways they affected their models of action. Through many similar quotes from various interviews, it was not difficult to see that these young Palestinians were likewise shifting formats, venues and using new political vocabulary that was consequently spreading through the region. Just like other Arab youth taking part in the ongoing global phenomena brought about by spread of the Internet and improvement in technology infrastructure and communication platforms, so too were Palestinian youth.

It was through Facebook and Twitter that young Palestinians learned about the framing of the demands of their Arab peers in the region, like Egypt, for example. In other words, not only were they inspired by the youth movements of the Arab Spring, but also by the new demands of their Arab Peers. Consequently, despite their intentional ongoing withdrawal from party-led "politics of fear," these youth activists would become the key organizers of the 15 March Movement in 2011. In this movement, Noor and her friends had asked for the unity of the very parties that they were so sick and tired of!

### **The 15 March movement: People want the end of the division**

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As much as the winds of the Arab Spring stirred the hopes and dreams of young Palestinians for unity and freedom, they also exposed several contradictions in the Palestinian context. One of these contradictions was that for the first time an impressive mass mobilization of young Palestinians were protesting not against Israel's occupation, but against their own political parties.

Before I delve into the verbal accounts of my interviewees, it is important to briefly summarize here the 15 March movement to better understand the stories of their involvement. Inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions of 2011, a series of Palestinian youth protests erupted in the streets of the West Bank, Gaza and inside Israel. Loose networks of independent Palestinian activists and leaderless youth groups unaffiliated with Palestinian political parties organized these protests. Despite the different trajectories of evolution in each of these sites of protests, the young activists generally shared a common political demand: "The people want the division (between Fatah and Hamas), to end."

While there was no clarity about what the alternative vision exactly was, or what the strategy for a longer term political change would be, it was apparent that these youth groups were moved to engage in protest movements, to publicly confront the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

In verbal accounts from at least 10 of 22 interviewed Palestinian activists from various cities and villages of the West Bank, they mentioned the preceding events that lead to the 15 March experience.

The first was a support event for the Tunisian demonstrations on 20 January

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2011.<sup>72</sup> The second was a gathering in the Al Manara Square to support the inspiring events underway at the time in Egypt.<sup>73</sup> In each case, the PA responded by first banning any form of protest in solidarity with the Tunisian or Egyptian Uprisings.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the presence of many *Mukhabarat* (secret police) were reported later to have infiltrated the crowd in order to break up the protests.

One activist<sup>75</sup> that I spoke to recalls how the PA police did not allow the youth to carry the Tunisian flag in support of the Tunisian people, nor the Egyptian flag in support of the Egyptian People. He told me that one particular PA tactic angered them the most. Whenever they organized a solidarity rally in support of the Arab Uprisings, the PA would outnumber them by sending large groups of supporters of the ruling Fatah party, at the same time and place, and to stage a demonstration in support of Palestinians held in Israeli jails. It was during these events that the core group of organizers faced, at full force, the brutality of the PA security forces.

For the first time in my life, I saw our own people turning against us. I will never forget seeing my friend being beaten in front of me- by our own people! It was very humiliating, disempowering and frightening. You are used to seeing an Israeli soldier putting his knee on your chest, beating you with cruelty- but you take it- because you know he is your enemy. But this time this was devastating and very personal (Personal Communication, November 16, 2015).

This quotation articulates a sense of desperation and alienation, echoing Noor's experience in Nablus. The same activist whom I quote here told me that a sentiment of

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72 Available at: <http://www.sahafi.jo/arc/art1.php?id=61361d83c5ff01b319a50a09a3c7b551a602189e>

73 Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/02/05/egypt.protests.palestinians/>

74 Available at: [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/3/headlines/palestinian\\_authority\\_shuts\\_down\\_pro\\_egyptian\\_protest](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/3/headlines/palestinian_authority_shuts_down_pro_egyptian_protest)

75 From my interview that I conducted with this activist in Ramallah, on November 12, 2015

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anger against the PA drove the core organizers to plan an even bigger demonstration. So right then and there, the angry activists posted another FB event, this time their own Palestinian Spring event. About 5 core youth groups, active since 2007-2009, invited all their followers to attend the protest. This sentiment resonated with a much wider audience of Palestinian youth in the West Bank, who responded to the group's FB call for another, much bigger protest in Al Manara Square.

This is how, partly as a reaction to the police brutality, and partly inspired by the Arab Spring, about seven thousand Palestinian Youth packed the main squares and jammed the streets of cities throughout the West Bank on 15 March 2011. A report<sup>76</sup> indicated that 3000 staged their protests in Ramallah, 2000 in the northern part of Nablus, and similar numbers in Hebron and Bethlehem. These reports are particularly important, given that most analysis on this movement focus only on the protests that took place in Ramallah. The event was quickly co-opted by the PA despite the passion and the enthusiasm of the activists. Four of the interviewees who were key organizers and participants in the street shared their experiences with me.

They explained how it all started as planned with the youth singing patriotic songs and waving Palestinian flags. But soon the protest was also plagued with confrontations between supporters of different political groups, spoiling the organizers' attempts to keep the movement apolitical. Noor, who was a participant of this protest in Nablus, recalls how shocked she and her friends were when confronted with these large groups of people who were there to break up their protest.

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=369077>

We rushed, we assumed too many things. We assumed first of all that we were like every other case in the Arab world. Right there in the street we were confronted by the bitter truth: We were wrong. Thousands of People showed up for this protest, but they were not with us, not the majority at least. They were screaming at us, directly in our faces: “Palestine is no Arab Spring- we are not like other countries in the region. We are occupied”. They teased us about our slogan: “Unity?! Freedom of Expression?! What about Hamas? What about the occupation? Who is causing the division?”...So, because we approached our own political parties as the only enemy (target of our protests), it made it easy for the PA to hijack our movement. And so they did!” (Personal Communication. November 6, 2016)

Noor’s quote illustrates the main contradiction that engulfed these youth groups at the epicenter of the protest in Ramallah’s Al Manara Square: the aspects of their youth movement, which could make it successful in the context of the Arab Spring, were the very same ones which caused its implosion in their own West Bank context. Al Manara was no Tahrir Square! I want to focus here on this controversial aspect of this movement, because it indicated the larger effect that the Arab Spring uprising had on Palestinian movements and Palestinian politics. The 15 March movement demonstrated that the struggle against the repressive authorities was indeed a Palestinian struggle as well.

The controversy embedded in this unexpectedly popular youth lead movement prompted a scholarly analysis and debate among Palestinian academics. An independent group of Palestinian scholars called Al-Shabaka, which means “the Network”, organized a round table discussion titled “The Palestinian Answers to the Arab Spring”.<sup>77</sup> A group of Palestinian scholars dealt with the effects that the Arab uprisings had on the

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<sup>77</sup>Available at: <https://al-shabaka.org/roundtables/achieving-palestinian-spring/>

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Palestinian movements and Palestinian politics (Al Shabaka, August 1, 2011). In this brief, Hilal concluded that the answers to the Palestinian Spring- should not be found in the context of the Arab Spring, but in the uniqueness of “The Palestinian condition”. Hilal’s analysis hinged on an understanding of the nature and history of the fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic, starting primarily with the signing of the Oslo accords.

While 15 March demands against their divided Palestinian leadership made sense against the backdrop of the Arab Spring events, internally it was primarily analyzed through the lenses of a mass-based Palestinian mobilization against the Israeli occupation, evident in the First and Second Intifada. Yet, when I asked Maryam about this overall conclusion, she seemed very aware and particularly cynical about this issue. To Maryam this was an indicator of another narrative that hijacked their 15 March movement.

This is the narrative that the “older generation” created to make us feel stupid. They never helped- they only told us what we did wrong. We learned everything on our own way. We learned how to give advice without dictating. We learned that we should empower, whoever is taking a lead role on the ground. This is our strategy- they just don’t like it, because it doesn’t empower them, because they can’t control it (Personal Communication, November 6, 2015).

Maryam’s quote articulates the Palestinian generation gap triggered primarily by the Arab Spring. In this case it was an Oslo generation, being portrayed as depoliticized and fragmented- set against an Intifada generation, presented as unified and patriotic. Yet some of the Oslo generation characteristics were remarkably similar to global networks of action. They seemingly share determination to remain unaffiliated with any political party; their commitment to civil, non-violent forms of action; their decentralized

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and leaderless networks of action; their reliance on social media platforms as their primary coordinating and communicating tools; the “occupation” of the public streets and main squares as their protest sites.

I have indicated in this section how two overlapping aspects of the Arab Spring became visible in the 15 March Palestinian Youth movement. First, the public youth revolts against the Palestinian authoritarian regime, and second, their increasing reliance on social media platforms for coordination and mobilization. Through this set of emerging elements, they can also be seen as part of a global trend of contemporary mobilization (Bimber, B., Flanagan, A. J., & Stohl, C. 2005, 2006; Langman 2006; Earl & Import 2011; Bennet & Segerberg 2013, Castells 2015). So far, some of these elements have been demonstrated in this study. Yet, these forms of protests must also be seen as deeply conditioned and affected by the West Bank context: Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. Following is an account that aims to explain the distinct modes of mobilization that came after the 15 March Movement, and that brought about creation of the Palestinians for Dignity network.

### **The Birth of the PFD Movement**

The Palestinian Freedom Rides Campaign<sup>78</sup> discussed at the opening of this chapter was an example of a systematic wave of protests and campaigns organized by the PFD network. This strategic pattern of switching targets of protests, alternating between the PA and the Israeli government, was partly a lesson learnt from the criticism addressed

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<sup>78</sup> No exact date for the creation of this group is available.

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to their 15 March movement, as explained above. Yet my interviews with its key founders, as well as the circulation of this name in the online media, indicate that PFD emerged out of the same core groups of urban Palestinians that organized the 15 March Movement in the wake of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings. Several online youth groups, such as the 15 March group, the Al Mannara youth group, Al Hirak al Shababi, and Benhib il Balad, ("We Love Our Country") merged under one umbrella now called Palestinians for Dignity (PFD).

A close look at the protests, campaigns and activities organized by these groups in the period of time between 2011-2013 reveals a window into the significant obstacles that these youth faced while operating on the ground. When these young activists were kicked out of their public streets and squares of the main cities by the PA, they quickly directed the target of their protests to the occupation. They did this by marching at checkpoints and driving through Israeli settlements surrounding Palestinian villages inside of the West Bank. When arrested by IDF forces, they again shifted their targets back to their own authorities. By looking closely at some of their campaigns, we can start seeing the genesis of a strategy of resistance characterized by non-compliance with Israeli occupation, the PA and the two main Palestinian political parties Fatah and Hamas.

### **PFD in 2011-2013: Targeting both the Palestinian Authority and Israeli Occupation**

On 30 June 2012, July 1, 2012, and July 3 2012, the PFD held broad-based protests in Ramallah over a three-day period, primarily targeting the PA's policies of

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negotiation with Israel.<sup>79</sup> The PFD had called a similar demonstration on January 2012<sup>80</sup>, protesting the PA's return to negotiations with the State of Israel.<sup>81</sup> This time around, the activists organized these particular demonstrations to protest the decision of the PA President Mahmoud Abbas to invite the ex-Israeli Defense Minister and Chief of Staff of the Israeli Occupation Forces, Shaul Mofaz, to Ramallah.<sup>82</sup>

The protests were attended by 500-1000 youth and met with violent repression.<sup>83</sup> Pictures of the PA's police using batons and tear-gas to attack the protesters went viral.<sup>84</sup> Stories of cracked bones and skulls crushed by the Palestinian police were widely shared in news networks such as Electronic Intifada.<sup>85</sup> Lina Al Safeein, wrote in her personal Facebook page:

I saw a friend being dragged away by four thugs, and immediately went after them, trying to get my body between my friend and the thugs so that they wouldn't take him. The same thug drew back his arm and slapped me hard across the face, in broad daylight on one of Ramallah's busiest streets, shouting "WHORE! PROSTITUTE!". Getting slapped like that can break your spirit. I would have preferred being beaten on the ground by a mob of police. I can't describe the humiliation I felt at that moment, the rage that swept through me as I tried to go after the thug, screaming at him that his day will come at my hands one way or another. People were pushing me back, telling me to calm down. I turned on them, shouting at them for just standing there and not doing anything, not going after the thugs themselves (Facebook status update, March 15, 2011)

Another activist told me how she experienced that moment in the square:

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79 Available at: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9267>

80 Palestinians for Dignity [blog post] Saeb Erekat, Go Home

81 Available at: <https://occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com/2012/01/12/palestinians-for-dignity-demonstration-against-the-return-to-negotiations-احضد-صامتة-احتجاجية-ورقعة/>

82 Available at: <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/01/palestinian-youth-fed-up-with-illegitimate-representation-to-protest-negotiations/>

83 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/pa-repression-feeds-flames-palestinian-discontent/11456>

84 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/palestinians-reclaim-streets-despite-pa-police-repression/11474>

85 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/palestinian-youth-call-ramallah-protest-against-israeli-palestinian-negotiations>

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“When we protested against Israeli brutality and the occupation, they called us Heroes! When we went after the brutality of PA, they called us Whores! I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs: People, decide! Are you against ALL forms of oppressions or are you being selective?”

These two quotes exemplify how the extreme use of force of the PSF (Palestinian Security Forces) sparked strong emotional sentiments such as anger, rage and humiliation. It solidified the conviction of these youth groups to continue to confront and rebel against the PA. The extreme use of force and PA’s subversive tactics to infiltrate and manipulate these youth groups shifted the attention of the PFD to now organize a new rally against the political arrests and police brutality of the PA.<sup>86</sup> In a press release that they posted on their website<sup>87</sup> they wrote:

Palestinians for Dignity", call on all Palestinians in Palestinian cities and villages, from Haifa and Jenin to Hebron and Ramallah to participate in a protest and march planned for Tuesday July 3rd at 17:00, moving from Al-Manara to the presidential quarters at Al-Muqata’a. We state clearly and decisively that the pain of beatings disappears with time, but shame does not; with each blow their clubs become weaker and our determination stronger {Facebook status update, July 3, 2012}.

After the public backlash at its actions, the PA did not confront the planned demonstration and let the 500 protesters march to the presidential compound of Mahmoud Abbas to vent their frustration. On September 11, 2012, the PFD organized protests<sup>88</sup> targeting Salam Fayyad's government decision to raise prices on many

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86 Retrieved from, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/ramallah-protesters-attacked-by-pa-police-photos/2012/07/01/gJQAWExWGW\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/ramallah-protesters-attacked-by-pa-police-photos/2012/07/01/gJQAWExWGW_blog.html)

87 Facebook Status update, [https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=256740551101634](https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=256740551101634)

88 Available at: <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=518957>

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consumer products, including fuel.<sup>89</sup> "Palestinians for Dignity" worked with other Ramallah-based groups to organize a rally that would head towards the Muqataa, the seat of presidential power for the Palestinian National Authority.<sup>90</sup> Only hours before the march was set to commence, Emergency Cabinet Prime Minister Salam Fayyad announced that the decision to raise consumer prices would be reversed for everything except car fuel.

PFD campaigns also challenged the political status quo by the international powers, including the US<sup>91</sup> and UN.<sup>92</sup> For example, in March 2012 protesters gathered to reject US President Obama's visit to the occupied Palestinian territory<sup>93</sup>. In May 2012, they surrounded the headquarters of The UN in Ramallah, demanding the closure of their offices in an effort to pressure the UN to publicly criticize administrative detention. The PA repeatedly cracked down on such protests, arresting and intimidating the key organizers and participants. The way the PA responded to such non-violent protests is a persistent indicator of a structural limitation which the PFD faced due to the increasingly authoritarian context in which they operated. In trying to overcome this limitation, the PA would shift their attention for some time to focus on the Israeli Occupation.

The Palestinians for Dignity had started a cycle of unarmed confrontational campaigns through their Freedom Rides campaigns in 2011, drawing attention to the Israeli occupation, the military checkpoints and Israeli Settlements. By 2013 this campaign had taken on a different form. On 11 January 2013, a group of about 200

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89 Available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/94454f0f-ed0b-40c1-b9b3-58c5b6f0b525>.

90 Retrieved from: <http://stopthewall.org/2012/10/03/palestinian-youth-why-were-speaking-out-against-political-arrests>

91 Available at: <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/05/under-mounting-pressure-from-hunger-strikers-and-un-protest-ban-ki-moon-criticizes-administrative-detention-but-weakly/>

92 Available at: <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=508726>

93 Available at: <http://www.voanews.com/a/west-bank-obama/1625603.html>

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Palestinian activists, among them members of the Palestinians for Dignity group, had another idea.

They decided to improvise a Palestinian settlement in Israeli occupied land, between Jerusalem and the West Bank.<sup>94</sup> Young activists erected tents on the same piece of land where the government had recently approved plans for construction of a major Jewish settlement. As soon as the first tent had been erected, Palestinian and international media reported that the activists had announced the establishment of a Palestinian village called Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun) in the area, and that the Palestinian owners of the land had agreed to this move.

This quickly drew the attention the activists had sought, and was covered by major international news outlets, like the *BBC*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*. By the time the Israeli authorities had the necessary court rulings to dismantle the tents and arrest the activists,<sup>95</sup> around 2,000 Palestinians had visited or tried to visit the site.<sup>96</sup> After Bab al-Shams, four more villages were established along the same pattern in the course of less than a year.<sup>97</sup> These are examples of some protests that directly challenged the occupation and other initiatives that shared the same concern of losing land and the tactic of directly confronting the occupying force.

These campaigns indicate another shifting moment in the PFD strategy. First, the novelty of their ideas amplified via social media raised the public profile of PFD in the eyes of the Palestinian community. Second, the shift in the venue of the protests exposed

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94 Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/12/world/middleeast/palestinians-set-up-camp-in-israeli-occupied-west-bank-territory.html>

95 Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21002450>

96 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/making-history-bab-al-shams/12098>

97 Retrieved from: <http://stopthewall.org/2013/02/02/more-200-palestinians-build-village-bab-munatir-nablus-region>

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the second major obstacle within Israel's occupation of the West Bank. Third, the protests were conducted away from PSF-controlled regions of the West Bank in Area C & B - Palestinian territories designated under the Oslo Accords to be fully or partially administrated by the Israeli authorities.

These forms of activism did not cause difficulties for the PA, which committed itself to support the security interests of Israel in the West Bank, but not in areas that were already under Israel' security responsibilities, as per The Oslo Accords. Consequently, the Palestinian authorities felt no need to crack down on this kind of activism. Instead, Israeli authorities cracked down on these activists quickly.<sup>98</sup> They arrested some, threatened others and jailed most of these activists for short periods of time. Every time these activists would be arrested<sup>99</sup>, social media campaigns would be organized to demand their immediate release.<sup>100</sup>

While the stories of Palestinian Freedom Rides, Bab Al Shams and others were an international success and an inspirational success story for many Palestinian activists, it also highlighted another quiet, but important development: these networks of activists had been connected to some popular movements in Palestinian society. The quiet shift of the format and venues of protests away from the PA-controlled urban streets and towards social and community work in villages, marked a new phase of networking between these isolated city-based movements lead by the younger activists, and popular village protests

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98 Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/13/israel-evicts-e1-palestinian-peace-camp>

99 Facebook Status update. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/free.fadi.quran/about/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/pg/free.fadi.quran/about/?tab=page_info)

100 Retrieved from <https://electronicintifada.net/content/israel-jailed-my-friend-hassan-karajah-break-grassroots-struggle/12144>

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led by popular resistance committees.

It is here, resulting from this continuous shift between two strategic targets, and continuous efforts to evade these two major limitations, that we start noticing another shift. These events made an explicit connection between the PFD and other kinds of popular activism that had remained largely implicit in years prior. By 2013, we notice less events posted on the PFD's Facebook page and their alternative social media platforms, but more on the website of the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign.<sup>101</sup> This shift indicated personal and networked integration on the grassroots level. The events analyzed so far reveal how the two-fold strategy executed by the PFD brought about their integration in the networks of Palestinian popular resistance committees.

### **Strengthening Ties with the Palestinian Popular Committees**

Bassem Tamimi, leader of the popular committee of Nabi Saleh village in the West Bank, heard about the Bab Al Shams village while awaiting his trial in an Israeli jail. Nonetheless, he became very excited about the news. Arrested nine times throughout the course of his lifetime (so far), Tamimi has been declared not guilty and was released each time. Amnesty International has declared him a “prisoner of conscience.”<sup>102</sup> In his interview with me, Tamimi credited the young PFD activists with rekindling the spirit of popular protest and bringing it back to life both in cities and villages in the West Bank.

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<sup>101</sup> Retrieved from the website <http://www.stopthewall.org>

<sup>102</sup> Available at: <http://972mag.com/amnesty-international-calls-for-release-of-bassem-tamimi-prisoner-of-conscience/59063/>

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He also spoke with wonder and excitement about their novel ideas and the creativity they applied in their thinking about new forms of protests.

Tamimi's story, and that of the popular resistance protests of Nabi Saleh, intertwines with the trajectories of the activism of these youth groups in quite unforeseen ways and in a multitude of different forms. In their search to avoid institutional repression and top-down ways of political organizing, these activists had started engaging individually in grassroots activism, becoming more aware of the daily needs and wishes of local communities. They did all this despite still not being bound together as the formal PFD network.

The first village to welcome groups of young activists from the city with their new ideas and new technologies was Nabi Saleh. Eager to experience a sense of renewal in his own village protests, Bassem welcomed them into his village together with their ideas and online networks of activism. In return, the activists started integrating their efforts more and more with the village protests of Nabi Saleh. In my interviews with key-members of the PFD, I learned that several of their previous youth groups had at some point or another all been part of the Nabi Saleh protests.

### **The Nabi Saleh Strategy**

Every Friday, after the midday prayer, the residents of Nabi Saleh march in protest against the Israeli occupation. Together as a group, men, women and children walk from the center of the village towards a natural water spring which has been seized by Israeli settlers living nearby. In the process of demanding access to the spring every Friday, the villagers clash with the settlers who are protected by Israeli soldiers. Maryam, the social media savvy and eager participant in the 15 March Movement, told me that

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when she first went to Nabi Saleh, her primary goal was to document the weekly non-violent demonstrations of the people of Nabi Saleh, and expose their actions to a wider international audience online. It was in these popular protests where Maryam saw young Palestinians hurling rocks at the Israeli soldiers and their military jeeps for the first time in person. It was also her first time experiencing the sight and smell of blasts of a noxious liquid known as “skunk”, as well as tear gas-canisters, which Israeli soldiers use to disperse the crowds of people and prevent the villagers’ advance toward the spring.

Nabi Saleh was fully online by 2011 thanks to her and her friends’ networks, email lists and journalistic contacts. The village had a blog<sup>103</sup>, a Facebook page,<sup>104</sup> its own you tube channel<sup>105</sup> and a steady outpouring of tweets called #screamingtamimi.<sup>106</sup> By 2013, the international press was actively covering the struggle in Nabi Saleh, including broadcasts by Al-Arabiyya and Al-Jazeera.<sup>107</sup> Journalists from The New York Times, The Economist and The Guardian covered Tamimi and Nabi Saleh in depth.<sup>108</sup> Most of these articles focus on Tamimi’s personal life,<sup>109</sup> and his life goal: that one-day his village protests would transform into a massive popular uprising against the Israeli occupation.

In my interview, I asked Bassem Tamimi more about his personal quest for that model, that strategy. I also asked him whether he saw a role for these younger networks of activists that had helped transform his village protests into an international success

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103 Retrieved from blog post: <https://nabisahehsolidarity.wordpress.com/about/>

104 Facebook status update: <https://www.facebook.com/Nabi-Saleh-Solidarity-177013109017209/>

105 Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQ9BLW2TEw0>

106 Twitter update, <https://twitter.com/nabisaheh>

107 Blog post retrieved from: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/palestinians-film-west-bank-protests-with-israeli-supplied-cameras/>

108 Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/magazine/is-this-where-the-third-intifada-will-start.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/magazine/is-this-where-the-third-intifada-will-start.html?_r=0)

109 Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/bassem-tamimi-our-destiny-resist/9894>

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story of non-violent activism. Did he see in them any political potential, given the current Palestinian context? He shared with me his story of a lifetime of activism. He described his own life as defined both by a strong sense of belonging and awareness of his roots, and an acute experience of defeat. Tamimi's own quest for a strategy started in his very village. In his 20's his quest for a purpose and a life strategy was defined by his experience as a youth organizer during the First Intifada. He witnessed and felt the consequences of that Palestinian Uprising and the Oslo Accords very personally. It is in his village where he started his first protest and there where he, now in his 50s, still leads the very same protests.

### **Tamimi's First Protest**

Bassem was born in Nabi Saleh in 1967, the year of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, which prior to the Six-Day War had been controlled by Jordan and Egypt. He participated in his first demonstration in 1976, at the age of nine, when villagers organized to oppose the stealing of their land for the construction of the Israeli colony of Halamish. The demonstration did not ultimately prevent the settlers of Halamish from establishing and expanding onto his village's land, but it was a pivotal moment for Tamimi. From that time Bassem never stopped demonstrating. What kept him going, he told me, was a sense of purpose. Today, 40 years after that first protest, he now leads and organizes the very same sort of protests he participated in as a child. If there was one basic lesson that his whole life as an activist had taught him, it is to never give up, especially when surrounded by the reality of defeat. "It is in these protests," he

told me, “where you renew your sense of purpose and solidarity and you stay connected to your roots.”

Bassem’s story, as leader of the Nabi Saleh’s popular committee, led me to research more literature about the Palestinian Popular Resistance.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, his active role as a youth organizer during the First Intifada pulled me back to the modern history of the Palestinian youth activism, which is primarily analyzed through the lenses of the First Intifada and their highly active role in political mobilization associated with political parties (Lockman & Beinin. 1999; Sayigh, 1993; Beitler, 2004).

I sometimes questioned whether all the roads of Palestinian political activism really lead to the First Intifada. As it turned out, both the trajectories of Palestinian activism, while not central to this study, were pertinent in my research. In trying to navigate the historical undercurrents of the Intifada, the intersection between these newer forms of activism and more broad based popular movements in the Palestinian context steered my research focus. This led me to dig deeper into the history of popular resistance committees, generated in this historic period, now known as the First Intifada.

### **First Intifada (1987-1993)**

“I am not your typical First Intifada generation person” he said to me as he thoughtfully sipped from his cup of tea. Bassem articulated his discontent with the way that the traditional narrative on the First Intifada has come to sink into the political imagination of the younger activists. The First Intifada<sup>111</sup> was a revolutionary, mass, popular uprising. It is considered by an overwhelming majority of scholarly literature as

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110 Some of this literature included Qumsyeh, 2011; Kaufman-Lacusta, 2011; King 2008)

111 The term intifada in Arabic literally means “shaking off”

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an opportune historic juncture in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Lockman, Beinin. 1990); Sayigh, 1993 Beitler, 2004).

Politically, it is often considered as the one bright moment that dramatically altered the way the world saw the Palestinian struggle. It transformed the dynamics between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. It put the Palestinian struggle at the center of the international agenda and generated support from world powers. From a social movement perspective, it represents the most diverse forms of resistance constituted by labor strikes, general strikes, tax revolts, consumer boycotts, flying illegal flags, political graffiti, hunger fasts, defying school closures and education bans, and reclaiming land through agricultural projects, etc. Such an unplanned outburst caught everyone by surprise, including the PLO. Despite the forceful response of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Intifada could not be stopped, continuing for years, finally waning in 1991 with the beginning of formal negotiations between Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

“It really doesn’t matter much what these activists know or have been told about the First Intifada,” Basem told me, “what matters most is what they don’t know.” His problem with the traditionally accepted narrative is that it stops short of explaining what the Intifada was about and how it was sustained. Bassem insists that while the spark for the uprising was spontaneous, the popular committees were anything but spontaneous. To him, the connective tissue of this movement, now called an Intifada, were the popular resistance committees, community self-governing networks that were the true initiators and the bodies that sustained the First Intifada over a period of five years. Scholars of popular resistance highlight the First Intifada as predominantly and deliberately an

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unarmed uprising (Awad, 1984; Qumsiyeh, 2011; King, 2008; Zaru, 2008; Kaufman-Lacusta, 2011;

*Muqawama sha'biya* , the term commonly used in Palestine, is roughly translated in English as “popular resistance”. An Internet search of “Palestinian popular resistance” now gives over 8.5 million hits (Qumsiyeh, 2011). In his book, “Popular Resistance in Palestine - A History of Hope and Empowerment”, Qumsiyeh explains that those who engage in acts of popular resistance believe that it is possible to change the behavior of their (violent) opponent by peaceful means.

The basic assumption of this kind of grassroots activism is that it is possible for individuals to effect social change (Qumsiyeh, 2011, pg.22-23). These scholars approach the first Intifada as a powerful example of organized civil resistance, obeying the logic of direct nonviolent action and alternative institution building. In his book, Qumsiyeh explains how the institutional vacuum in the West Bank and Gaza led to the creation of a “bottom-up infrastructure.” This infrastructure consisted of decentralized community-based organizations and neighborhood committees, which encompassed Palestinian society. These new networks were characterized by direct democratic decision-making, the absence of ideological squabbles and a high capacity for adaptation, all of which made it very difficult for the Israeli occupying power to deal with the uprising.

From this short analysis of the First Intifada, one can draw similarities to today’s political environment, marked by authoritarianism and political repression. This environment has alienated youth from their current leaders and institutions and caused their rejection of top-down party politics. The environment today, though very different, has fostered similar kinds of decentralized and horizontal networks of activism that

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characterized the First Intifada. Amplified by the decentralized nature of the new technologies, these new groups represent another quiet, circumstantial development of renewed forms of more traditional decentralized grassroots activism.

### **From Intifada to Oslo and the Generation Gap in Between**

The Oslo Accords have shaped the political environment in which these youth operate, as well as their forms of activism. The PA is part of the present day framework established by the Oslo Accords, and was outlined above as being part of what these youth movements oppose. In the midst of the ongoing conflict during the First Intifada from 1987 to 1993, Palestinian and Israeli representatives initiated diplomatic negotiations aimed at ending the conflict and establishing a recognized Palestinian state with agreed upon borders. The parties' commitment put into effect the Declaration of Principles (DOP) on Interim Self-Government Arrangements on September 13, 1993.<sup>112</sup> The signing of these accords, now referred to as the Oslo Accords, brought the First Intifada to an official end.

The accords resulted in the creation of an interim Palestinian governing body known as the Palestinian National Authority (PA). Based on these accords, the parties agreed to a temporary framework for their relations during an interim period lasting five years.<sup>113</sup> During that time, the two sides would agree on important issues such as borders, refugees, Jerusalem, and settlements through bilateral negotiations.<sup>114</sup> The agreement increased the PA's responsibilities and territorial control through the categorization of land in the Palestinian territories into three types of areas: Area A, Area

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112 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement 1995

113 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement 1995

114 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement 1995

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B, and Area C. Area A included the Gaza Strip and 17.2 percent of the West Bank containing the most densely populated cities and communities. The framework of the Oslo Accords laid out that the newly formed Palestinian Security Forces would assume full responsibility for internal security, public order, and civil affairs in Area A.

Area B included 23.8 percent of the West Bank and included mainly urban and rural areas directly surrounding Area A lands. In Area B lands, the PA assumed full responsibility for civil affairs and public order while Israel maintained responsibility for security. Lands categorized as Area C made up 59 percent of the West Bank and include all “connective” lands between Palestinian population centers. In Area C the government of Israel maintained full control over security, public order, and civil affairs. Area C lands contained Palestinian agricultural land, nature reserves, Israeli settlements, designated military reserves, the Jordan Valley, and large tracts of land where Bedouins roamed. Israel retained responsibility for security in and surrounding Israeli settlements, as well as overarching security control over the West Bank and Gaza.

### **The Oslo Accords, and Bassem’s village**

“You know... When Oslo came it was supposed to give our generation so much hope. If you looked at it from outside, it was like a dream come true...but in a lot of ways, it turned into a nightmare.”

Bassem ended up feeling the “nightmare” personally in the form of the division of Nabi Saleh village into two administrative areas as a direct consequence of the Oslo Accords. After Oslo, Bassem’s village was split between Area B and Area C. This arrangement left all residents of the Israeli-controlled portion (Area C) with significant

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difficulties in establishing normal lives. For example, they were unable to build or develop their land without securing rarely granted Israeli permission. And when they built without permission they became targets of potential home demolitions, in addition to already being vulnerable to land confiscations and arbitrary arrests. When Israeli bulldozers came close to Nabi Saleh to construct the Halamish settlement, now under the administration of Israelis in area C, it became clear to Bassem that the Oslo Accords and all of its mechanisms would never lead to a two-state solution.

By 1987, “52 per cent of the area of the West Bank and 42 per cent of Gaza had come under direct Israeli control, while the number of Jewish settlers had reached 67,000.”<sup>115</sup> By mid-year 2012, just over 650,000 Israelis were settled in Palestinian lands, with over 350,000 Israelis living in the West Bank, and 300,000 Israelis living in East Jerusalem in 124 settlement communities in the West Bank and 12 settlements in East Jerusalem.<sup>116</sup>

In 2010, the settler population growth rate in the West Bank was 4.9 percent, while the growth rate of the general population in Israel was 1.9 percent. Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank grew by 20 percent during 2010 to 2011, which contributed to a doubling of the number of Palestinians displaced by demolitions of Palestinian property near the settlements. In the summer of 2008, Israeli settlers from Halamish seized control of a number of natural springs, all of which were located on private Palestinian land belonging to residents of Nabi Saleh. The villagers resumed their protests.

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<sup>115</sup> Sayigh, Y.(1997). *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*

<sup>116</sup> Foundation for Middle East Peace,2012.

### **Oslo: What Went Wrong?**

Oslo Accords have been controversial since the moment they were signed.<sup>117</sup> Critics have targeted both its contents and the degree to which the Israeli and Palestinian official governments followed through on the commitments they made in the Accords.<sup>118</sup> Some called it an excellent achievement of diplomacy, which created extraordinary and cooperative order between Israelis and Palestinians. At the same time, others describe it as the capitulation of Palestine and the signing of the “Treaty of Versailles”<sup>119</sup>, or a nail in the coffin of Palestinian nationalist politics (Allen 2015).

Substantial literature deals with the consequences of the Oslo accords on political mobilization. The fragmentation of the national territory, the deterioration of the economy (Roy, S. (1999), the formation of the PA (Parker, 1999: xii) and the professionalization of NGOs (Hammami, 2000; Dana, 2009) have all been analyzed as causes for the increased distance of Palestinians from the political process. NGOs mushroomed after the signing of the Oslo Accords.

Rema Hammami argues that the depoliticization is rooted in an ongoing process of NGO retrenchment from a popular constituency that predated Oslo, but which has sharpened with continuing de-politicization of the society that has marked the formation of PA rule.<sup>120</sup> Tariq Dana identified four dimensions of “what went wrong” since Oslo. He focused on the shift in organizations’ agendas, the role of the grassroots, the status of

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117 Rothsten, Robert L., Moshe Ma’oz, and Khalil Shikaki. *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process*

118 <http://allegralaboratory.net/the-road-to-oslo-and-its-reverse-palestine/>

119 Said, E. (1995). *The Middle East Peace Process: Misleading Images and Brutal Actualities*

120 Hammami, R. (2000) *Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: from NGO politics to social movements?* Middle East Report, No. 214, pp.

16-19

politics, and the production of knowledge, concluding with recommendations to revive civil society as a fertile terrain for profound social transformation.<sup>121</sup>

### **NGOization and Popular Committees**

When Huwaida Arraf<sup>122</sup> arrived from the US in Palestine she was working as a youth coordinator for the organization “Seeds of Peace.” She told me how she initially believed that “Seeds of Peace” was working toward peace and was there to bring people to dialogue, she wanted to be part of that process. She imagined being able to participate through her work and her individual protest efforts. That said, striking a balance between the two was easier said than done.

Seeds of Peace told me: you can protest, but you have to stay out of the jail and also keep your face out of the media, because as seeds of peace we can't be affiliated with such protests. So that in a way became a limitation for me, because as a seeds of peace coordinator I wanted to get the workshop discussions that these kids were having in the street. These students hadn't seen before a home demolition let alone participate in protest against it. For example once we decided we would raise tents in the homes that were set up for demolition and we would stay there. This was actually against what the leadership of the Seeds of Peace told us, but I continued to do it anyway. So I kept going out in the street and then my face was suddenly everywhere in the media. (Personal Communication, October 21, 2015).

That was the day that Huwaida resigned from her position with Seeds of Peace, since it was clear that she could not be an activist while also abiding by the organization's policies. Huwaida's story of disillusion with NGOs is not a unique one. Some scholars describe a process of NGO-ization of Palestinian youth activism as a direct result of the

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<sup>121</sup> Tariq, D. (2015) The structural transformation of Palestinian civil society: key paradigm shifts. *Middle East critique*, Vol.24, No. 2, pp. 191-210

<sup>122</sup> one of the original Freedom Bus Riders at the beginning of this chapter

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Oslo Accords. Just over a third of Palestinian organizations were established during a mushrooming of NGOs in the first half of the 1990s when the Oslo process was underway.

International funding patterns in conjunction with the establishment of the PA guided the way these NGOs functioned and how they set their priorities in accordance with funders' agendas. Many view this financial and institutional growth of NGOs to be the cause of a kind of de-socialization and de-politicization of some Palestinian youth. The NGO that Huwaida was working for, the "Seeds of Peace," represents yet another aspect of the NGO-ization of youth activism in the Palestinian context: the corralling of NGOs and program participants toward a particular vision of peace, which many Palestinians felt was skewed away from actual potential to achieve freedom (Allen, 2015).

This partiality contributed to these organization's declining credibility in Palestinian society, distancing them from the Palestinian grassroots, while at the same time it expanded career paths for young Palestinians into NGO work. Noor, the 15 March activist from Nablus, for example, told me how during the years of the Second Intifada, when she was still in high school, she participated in many NGO workshops, primarily focused on human rights:

I remember, one of the workshops was about the environment – The examples that they brought to us to explain this concept were things like "burning tires during protests- hurts the environment". These peace lovers were talking to kids like us, whose houses were bombed or destroyed in one way or another during the second intifada. When I think about it now, I just laugh because I find it hilarious. But if someone told me these stupid examples now – I would probably punch them in their face! (Personal Communication, October 29, 2015).

Just like Noor, Huwaida had quickly come to realize that these activities for peace

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primarily took place in workshops and indoors. Huwaida herself had started to firmly believe that they needed to “take it to the streets”. So in many ways the “Seeds of Peace” work no longer felt relevant to her anyway.

Freed of her NGOs limitations, Huwaida continued participating in local demonstrations. Over time she recognized how disastrous these demonstrations were simply in terms of numbers of injuries and lives lost when Palestinian were protesting on their own. She began to think about connecting with international activists to participate and be present with the Palestinians during their protest. Huwaida believed that such a presence of international activists could potentially help prevent some of this damage and also help change the way the media was covering such protests.

“Someone suggested that we bring a large number of international activists,” she told me, “to elevate the profile of our protests and we thought that was a great idea.” This idea defined the next four years of Huwaida’s activism. She organized, participated in and was the spokesperson for three International movements: ISM (the International Solidarity Movement), the Flotilla Movement and the Free Gaza Movement.

“When I started I had hoped that ISM would become the organization that would actually define the strategy that would become a national strategy,” Huwaida told me. “This is not what it ultimately became.” Huwaida had also initially hoped that such organizations, particularly ISM, would bring more international activists to the ground and reinvigorate Palestinian popular resistance. But the focus of the ISM remained primarily international and virtual. For Huwaida Arraf, the internationalized focus of such organization was a good thing that needed to happen, but was simply not *her* thing. For Huwaida, the *real* struggle was to address the issues in the streets, and to discover

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ways to empower people protesting on the ground. Huwaida, one of the original Palestinian Bus Riders, was also invited to contribute regularly to the PFD protests. In addition, she went back to local popular protests, demonstrating side by side with Bassem Tamimi in Nabi Saleh.

Within Huwaida's story and her involvement with ISM and The Flotilla Movement, unfolds another stage of Palestinian activism, namely its internationalization and establishment of international support networks. Seen together, the narratives of Huwaida and Bassem as activists seeking to connect old and new networks of popular resistance during two periods of the Palestinian Mobilization have a central place in this part of my analysis. I discovered that there were many areas of overlap between the forms of activism pursued by the online networks of youth groups, international online activism and popular committees on the ground pursued by people like Bassem Tamimi.

### **Second Intifada – The Sudden Shift of Popular Committees**

Just as the Second Intifada was progressing at full speed, a quiet, different form of popular resistance was also underway. Bassem and others from Nabi Saleh had begun attending demonstrations in Budrus. Budrus is a village just 20 minutes from Nabi Saleh by car, which was in danger of being cut off from the rest of the West Bank by Israel's planned separation barrier. This is the concrete wall and electrified chain-link fence that snakes along the border, and in many places juts deeply into Palestinian territory to carve out sections of land for Israeli settlements. Residents in Budrus began demonstrating. Palestinians elsewhere were fighting with Kalashnikovs, but the people of Budrus decided, according to Ayed M., an old friend of Bassem's who organized the movement

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there that unarmed resistance “would stress the occupation more.” Their strategy appeared to work. After 55 demonstrations, the Israeli government agreed to shift the route of the barrier to the so-called 1967 green line. The tactic spread to other villages including Biddu, Nil’in, Al Ma’asara, and in 2009, to Nabi Saleh. Together they formed what is known as the “Popular Resistance,” a loosely coordinated effort that has maintained what has arguably been the only continuing form of active and organized non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation in the West Bank since 2003.

Our main quest is to convince our society about the value of these unarmed popular protests. To do that we had two ways: First, the academic way - Spreading formal knowledge through workshops, seminars, meetings, etc. but for our culture and the way we really absorb active learning, these methods were not suitable. The second is- creating a model on the ground as a demonstration, so we can convince society through more of a “seeing is believing” approach (Personal Communication, January 22, 2016).

Bassem’s goal, as articulated in this quotation, was to demonstrate that it was still possible to struggle and to do so without taking up arms. His thinking was that when the spark came, resistance might spread as it had during the first intifada. In Bassem’s mind, the spark would likely come as a direct effect of the ways social media has influenced the mobilizing forms of the “Oslo Generation”. Together, they are trying to find a model, a recipe that could spread the unarmed revolt across occupied Palestine.

The stories of Noor and Maryam, Huwaida and Bassem, exemplify how deeply intertwined are these forms of activism and their initiatives. While they all intersect in one protest or another, organized by the PFD, each story of activism diverges again in different times and phases of Palestinian activism all across the West Bank. Despite major episodes of war and violence, party authoritarianism and police brutality, military

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checkpoints and geographical segregation, the stories of these networked individuals also demonstrate continuous will power to go beyond such limitations.

The presence of these multiple networks of actions which bridge generations and different forms of activism, can be viewed as elements of a bottom-up infrastructure where many things can be set into motion at the right moment. This may be also seen as glimpses of a still-developing strategy, grounded in networked social movements and decentralized mobilization, growing outside of the organizational structures of main parties and formal social movements.

## **Conclusion**

The story of Palestinians for dignity, as brought here, is not only the story of a group of activists who inspired by the Arab Spring, organized the 15 March movement and a series of other protests afterwards. It is also a story of evolving networked movements in a Palestinian context. The inclusion of the original 6 freedom riders of the Freedom Rides campaign, that opened this chapter, was part of a strategic effort from the activists of the PFD to connect their actions with those of ongoing grassroots movement in occupied West Bank. The different strands of narratives of activists from different backgrounds, locations and even generations, are tied together here through their common quest for a networked grassroots movement, outside of the organizing structures of the Palestinian parties.

While the PFD was created by building upon the existing social and online networks of the 15 March Movement, the span of activism and activists of these groups

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spread way beyond Ramallah. Although deeply affected by the ebbs and flows of Palestinian political realities, PFD expanded their online decentralized networks of action and increased their impact by linking their campaigns and protests with ongoing revolts of existing Popular Resistance Committees.

The ideas, protests and stories of the activists in this chapter reveal that underneath a seemingly isolated cycle of protests and small leaderless groups, lies an impressive ecosystem of creative ideas, organizational capacity and passionate resistance. PFD activities are a case in point in demonstrating that through creative use of social media, they expanded not only their networks of action and sites of protests. They also brought a noticeable change in the repertoire of the existing non-violent grassroots resistance in the Palestinian context.

By studying evolving dynamics of the PFD network from the inside, I managed to trace an emerging pattern in their mobilizing tactics and structure of their campaigns. This pattern consists of an authentic idea for a protest- symbolic in its creativity and which resonates emotionally with the immediate participants. Having a supportive network for an original idea and an element of secrecy in the way it is organized, both appear crucial in order to catch both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities by surprise. Finally, choosing the right social tools and networks to spread the event makes the protest highly effective instantaneously. Almost all of PFD's protests have followed this same pattern.

While these emerging tactics and formats of their protests are highly vulnerable to the political constraints as mentioned above, they do allow for the growth of a network of

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highly effective activists outside of the established structures of Palestinian political parties. These networked activists are slowly working towards building a networked movement with multiple strategic goals. They aim to establish a block of successful examples, serving as inspirational moments for a broader mass of activists, working informally on the ground to build inter-community trust.

Next, is to build an experienced pool of leaders able to transfer their successes from an informal community of sustained interest to a larger and more visible network of actions, evident in the case of popular resistance committees. Despite the obstacles represented by these realities, PFD moved beyond fragmented efforts into a continuous and confrontational cycle of non-violent protests, which lasted for more than three years. This, in itself is a remarkable achievement of these young activists who repeatedly engaged in confrontational resistance against the ongoing Israeli Occupation, while at the same time, also remaining highly critical of the Palestinian leadership and its political parties. It is a further demonstration of my overall argument in this dissertation that networked movement, taking place outside the structures of official parties and hierarchical organizations, where these small networks of youth regularly and meaningfully contribute, is quietly growing.

#### **Chapter Four: Between Old Demands and New Protests: Stop The Praver Movement - A Case Study of Palestinian Youth Activism in Israel, 2011-2013**

In September 2011, a new bill on the Arrangement of Bedouin Settlements in the Negev Desert was announced to the Israeli public.<sup>123</sup> The bill, commonly known as “the Praver Plan<sup>124</sup>”, aimed to relocate approximately 40,000 Bedouins<sup>125</sup> from the Southern arid region of Israel, known as Negev in Hebrew or Naqab in Arabic, into state designated locations for the Bedouin population of Israel.

While the Praver Plan was new, the battle between Bedouin land right activists and state policies in Israel was not. Between 2011-2012, various UN and EU Committees, as well as Arab Civil Society organizations within Israel, made calls for the Israeli Government to withdraw the legislation.<sup>126</sup> These critics viewed the plan as further proof of the state’s policy of marginalization of the Bedouins of the Negev, who consider this desert area as their historical land.<sup>127</sup> Undeterred by such criticism,

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<sup>123</sup> Government Decision, *Confirming the Recommendations for Regulation of the Bedouin Settlement in the Negev*, 11 September 2011 [hereinafter Government Decision or GD]; In approving the plan, the government also accepted amendments by National Security Adviser Yaakov Amidror, who was commissioned by the State to review the plan in June 2011 (Government Decision no. 3707, 11 September 2011)

<sup>124</sup> The plan was prepared by a Committee headed by Mr. Ehud Praver, former deputy chairman of the National Security Council

<sup>125</sup> The numbers are different as represented by different sources, varying from 30.000-70.000. The numbers used in this study are in alignment with those used consistently by Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel.

<sup>126</sup> Discriminatory Praver Plan to evict tens of thousands of Bedouins from their communities in the Negev. (2013, July 11). Retrieved from <http://www.eccpalestine.org/discriminatory-praver-plan-to-evict-tens-of-thousands-of-bedouins-from-their-communities-in-the-negev/>

<sup>127</sup> Demolition and Eviction of Bedouin Citizens of Israel in the Naqab (Negev) - The Praver Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7589>

the Praver Plan passed its first reading at the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), by 43 votes to 40 on 24 June 2013.<sup>128</sup>

The news caused Amal age 22, whose family lives in the Negev/Naqab Desert, to relive painful flashbacks from 2010, when hundreds of Israeli police officers and heavy machinery had rolled into the Bedouin village of Al Araqib to evict all of the families and demolish their houses. Before shattered into unrecognizable pieces<sup>129</sup>, Amal had quickly collected some cherished objects from her room. Then, on her mobile, she recorded her own home being demolished and shared it on her Facebook page. For Amal, this was not merely a legal or political issue, but a deeply personal one. For her and her family, the Praver Plan represented their final severance from their land.

In the meantime, Maysan age 22, from a Druse village in Northern Israel, and Majd aged 20, from Haifa city in Israel, received the news through their connections with a network of about 50 activists, spread across four youth groups, under the name “Naqab for Human Rights”. Inspired and encouraged by the popular movements of 2011 starting in Tunisia and Egypt, these individuals were part of a group of young Palestinians within Israel who had organized and participated in a series of protests across the North and South of Israel in the period of 2011-2012. Neither Maysan nor

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<sup>128</sup> Press Release: The Knesset Approves the Highly Devastating Praver-Begin Bill in First Voting Round. (2013, June 25). Retrieved from <http://www.dukium.org/press-release-the-knesset-approves-the-highly-devastating-praver-begin-bill-in-first-voting-round/>

<sup>129</sup> Israel: Halt Demolitions of Bedouin Homes in Negev. (2010, August 1). Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/08/01/israel-halt-demolitions-bedouin-homes-negev>

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Majd were Bedouins, but they decided to protest nevertheless.

In line with their involvement in previous protests, these young activists turned first to their digital networks, relying on hashtags such as [#StopPraverPlan](#), [#AngerStrike](#) on Twitter to raise awareness about the bill. Next, they created a Facebook page “Prawershallnotpass”<sup>130</sup>, in which they urged young people to join them in their call to action. Thanks to these actions, initiated primarily via social media platforms, massive youth protests took place initially on 15 July and 1 August 2013 in Northern and Southern Israel<sup>131</sup>, culminating on 30 November 2013. Palestinians of Israel<sup>132</sup>, together with Palestinians of the West Bank<sup>133</sup>, Gaza<sup>134</sup> and East Jerusalem organized separate demonstrations on the same day within their geographic areas.<sup>135</sup> Two weeks later, the government of Israel dropped the Praver bill.

Several elements stood out most in these protests. First, large youth crowds composed of different minority groups in Israel - Muslims, Christians, Druse and

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130 Facebook Status update:

<https://www.facebook.com/prawershallnotpass>

131 Balasubramanian, J. & Vaid-Menon, A. (2013, August 19). A new wave of Palestinian Youth Activism in Response to Israeli Praver Plan. Retrieved from <http://www.momken.org/?mod=articles&ID=5693>

132 Schwarzenberg, H. (2013, November 30). Day of Rage against the Praver plan: Jaffa, 30.11.2013. Retrieved from <https://schwarzenberg.com/day-of-rage-against-the-praver-plan-yafa-30-11-2013/>

133 Viscous crackdown on unarmed protesters against the Praver Plan just outside Ramallah. (2013, December 2). Retrieved from <https://palsolidarity.org/2013/12/viscous-crackdown-on-non-violent-protestors-against-the-praver-plan-just-outside-ramallah/>

134 Palestinians rally in Gaza to stop Praver Plan on International Day of Rage. (2013, December 3). Retrieved from <https://palsolidarity.org/2013/12/photos-palestinians-rally-in-gaza-to-stop-praver-plan-on-international-day-of-rage/>

135 Kane, A. (2013, November 30). Thousands across Palestine protest against efforts to uproot Bedouin. Retrieved from <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/11/thousands-palestine-efforts/#sthash.zDzD0aY3.dpuf>

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Bedouins of Israel, collectively took to the streets.<sup>136</sup> Second, like rarely seen before inside Israel, these protesters waved hundreds of Palestinian Flags, while wearing black and white *keffiyeh*. Daring Young Palestinians of Israel, usually referred to as “48”ers, held banners likening the Praver Plan with a “Second Nakba”, referring to it as “the biggest Israeli land-grab since 1948”.<sup>137</sup> Why and how did a protest demanding Bedouin rights within Israel turn into a cross border Palestinian youth movement, demanding Palestinian rights? What motivated this visible shift in the framing of these youth protests from one of social struggle for minority rights within Israel, to one of a Palestinian national struggle? What conditions enabled the coordination of a networked Palestinian youth movement across the Green Line?

Substantial scholarship has analyzed such protests primarily in the context of Bedouin Land Rights activism, set against their systemic marginalization within Israel (Abu-Saad, 2008, Kedar, 2003, 2004; Shamir, 1996; Yiftachel, 2000 Abu-Rabia, 2001; Hall, 2014; Yiftachel, Roded, & Kedar, 2016; McKee, 2015; Swirski, 2016; Kark & Frantzman, 2012). However, studies that examine the dynamics of the Praver movement in the context of new forms of youth activism in the age of social media is missing. When reviewing scholarly literature on this subject, I found much of it is focused either on Palestinian Youth of the Palestinian Territories or on Israeli Youth of Israel. This narrow

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136 Activists hold 'day of rage' protests against Praver Plan. (2013, November 30). Retrieved from <https://972mag.com/activists-stage-day-of-rage-protests-against-praver-plan/82706/>

137 Stop Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Bedouin! (2013, November 30). Retrieved from <https://ozcoalitionagainstisraeliapartheid.wordpress.com/2013/11/30/melbourne-against-the-praver-plan-stop-israels-ethnic-cleansing-of-palestinian-bedouin/>

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framework of analysis has resulted in less attention to efforts by young Palestinians of Israel in a Post-Arab Spring context.

For example, when studying new social movements and forms of youth activism in the Internet age, there is substantial focus on the Jewish Israeli youth protests movements during the summer of 2011 (Alimi, 2012; Allweil, 2013; Grinberg, 2013, Schechter, 2013, Amram, 2013, Marom, 2013; Schipper, 2015). These protests, directed against house pricing in Tel-Aviv, started with a small encampment on the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv and evolved within two weeks into large youth mobilizations. Overall, such protests were seen as part of the newer global protests in an increasingly neo-liberal world.

Similarly, in the context of Palestinian youth movements, much of the media and scholarly attention at the time focused on youth of the West Bank and Gaza, and their demand for an end to political division between their two main political factions, Fatah and Hamas, or an end to Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, (Al Shabaka, 2011; Casati, 2016; Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Doha Institute, 2012; Farsakh, 2012; Hilal, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Maira, 2015; Sayre & Al-Botmeh, 2009). Taken together, these scholars overlook the study of other Palestinian youth actors, outside of the Palestinian Territories, and particularly those in Israel.

In the following chapter, I address these shortcomings in the literature by analyzing the Praver movement in the larger context of emerging Palestinian networked youth movements at the wake of the Arab Uprisings of 2011. Besides the mobilizations against the Praver Plan, the inclusion of a series of protests organized by young

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Palestinians of Israel during 2011 is crucial in this chapter, because the key organizers of the massive youth mobilizations of the Praver Protests were the same core networks of activists directly involved in the protests of 2011-2012. Such a sustained cycle of protests speaks further to the main argument of this overall dissertation: the emergence of a loose network of Palestinian activists across borders, whose ties were forged outside of existing Party structures through their digital networks, and their bond was strengthened through such events.

I argue that the shift in the framing of these protests from the Bedouin of Israel to the Palestinians within Israel marked a turning point in the political awareness of young Palestinians of Israel. The use of social media platforms to coordinate these protests also exposed the political potential of a network of Palestinians who were able to unite efforts across the fragmented segments of Palestinian society into one broad-based movement within Israel. Finally, the Stop the Praver movement demonstrated that despite geographical and political fragmentations, a growing network of Palestinian activists across borders forged new connections and strategies for resistance

I start by briefly capturing the historical context and current composition of the various Palestinian Arab minorities that live in Israel. I interject within this account personal stories of some activists from Haifa to account for the particular evolution of the movement rooted in the complexities of their own communities. Situating their protests against the backdrop of the contemporary events going on at a regional level- such as the Arab Spring, I explain how they translated their personal experiences from participating in online and offline protests, into the organizing strengths of the Praver Movement.

## **Palestinians of Israel**

Throughout this dissertation, I particularly focused on the evolving dynamics of networked Palestinian protest movements between 2011-2013. Concurrently, in separate chapters, I have found it essential to weave this narrative into a broader social-historical account for each group of Palestinians living in their respective geographic area, such as the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In this chapter, I follow the same logic by outlining a comprehensive background of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, while maintaining the same focal narrative on protest movements by Palestinians of Israel in the Post Arab Spring context. This approach enables me to interject these seemingly isolated movements, and the stories of the activists involved, in the broader narrative of Palestinians of Israel and their constant search for empowerment and political expression.

The multiple and ever-changing terms defining the Arab Community of Israel reveal, at least symbolically, the uneasiness over referencing the troubled history of this particular community, at times dubbed as “Israel’s Achilles’s heel”.<sup>138</sup> For over half a century, scholars writing on Israeli/Palestinian affairs have used the definition “Israeli Arabs”, as those living “on the inside,” meaning inside the 1949 armistice line, otherwise known as the Green Line (Zureik, 1979; Lustick, 1980; Peled, 2013; Molavi, 2014; Rabinowitz & Abu-Baker, 2015).

Yet, among the activists that I spoke to, and in various reports and studies

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138 Bahour, S. (2016, September 26). Don't call us "Israeli Arabs": Palestinians in Israel speak out. Retrieved from: <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-1.744398>

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produced by Palestinian NGOs, observers of Palestinian-Israeli affairs etc., I ran into another term: “48ers”. These multiple definitions demonstrate the extent to which the legal standing and political future for various groups of Palestinians differ. This definition “48ers” is a symbolic marker of the year 1948, where the foundation for two sharply contrasted narratives lays: For the Israeli people, the historic year marks the creation of and declaration of Independence by the State of Israel. For the Palestinian people, the year marks the beginning of a tragic narrative known in the national memory as the year of Nakbah, (The “Catastrophe” in Arabic).

In 1948, 85% of the Palestinians living within Israeli controlled territory delimited by the Green Line, determined in 1949, were uprooted and became refugees (Segev, 1986; Morris, 1987, 1994; Kimmerling & Migdal, 1994; Khalidi, 1997; Shlaim, 2000). The Palestinian refugees of 1948 fled to the West Bank and Gaza, as well as to adjacent Arab states, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The particular predicament of the Palestinians of Israel is that in that fateful year, 1948, when the rest of their fellowmen became either stateless or refugees, they remained in their homes and lands and emerged as citizens within the borders of the newly created State of Israel.

According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, today one-fifth of Israel’s citizen population is Palestinian, totaling more than 1.6 million citizens. Of these, 82% are Muslims, 9% are Christians and 9% are Druze. In addition, around 200,000 of this population are Arab Bedouin citizens, members of the indigenous Palestinian community who remained on their lands in the Negev (Naqab) region. Furthermore, Palestinian youth constitute more than half of the Palestinian society in Israel, with the age group ranging

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between 0-29 years old, constituting 62% of the Palestinian population in Israel.<sup>139</sup> About 36.0% of the population is age 14 and the median age of Palestinians in Israel is 22 years in the North and just 15 years in the South.<sup>140</sup> 96.1% of Palestinians in Israel (15 years and above) are literate.

In this study, I use the terms “Palestinian Citizens of Israel” when I refer to the different segments of the Palestinian minorities living in Israel. I use the term “48ers” to refer to the activists involved in the Praver Protests, born around 1990, and spread across Southern and Northern Israel. Another reason for using the term “48ers” is because that is what these activists called themselves in my interviews with them. Also for the sake of clarity, I want to point out that I use both terms as interchangeable, to refer to the segment of the Palestinian nation which lives inside Israel, holds Israeli citizenship and maintains civic relations with the state, along with some rights.

A substantial body of research that focuses on the Palestinian Citizens of Israel characterizes them as a collective, fraught with external pressures and charged with inner tensions (Zureik, 1979; Lustick 1980; Peled 2013). The general consensus between these scholars is that such internal and external dynamics have created a paradoxical situation by placing the Palestinians of Israel at once on the periphery of both Israeli and Palestinian societies”.<sup>141</sup> In addition, Palestinian Citizens of Israel as a particular group

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139 Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel (2012). Field Research conducted by Baladna: Association for Arab youth in Israel.

140 Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel (2012). Field Research conducted by Baladna: Association for Arab youth in Israel.

141 Majid Al Haj, in his article titled “The Status of the Palestinians in Israel: A Double Periphery in an Ethno-National State”, uses the term “A Double periphery” to describe the status of Palestinians of Israel. The article is part of a series of articles published in the volume “Critical Issues in Israeli Society” (Dowty, 2004).

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within Israel has a significantly lower socioeconomic status and fewer social resources than the Jewish majority (Hammack, 2010; Gharrah, 2015).

External pressures, usually felt in the form of larger events defining Israeli-Palestinian relations, such as the First Intifada in 1987-1992, Oslo Accords of 1993, or the Second Intifada in 2000-2005, were described in more details in the West Bank Chapter. As a result of such events, Palestinian Citizens of Israel were further distanced from the rest of the Palestinian population. Furthermore, the message from the Palestinian Leadership to the Palestinian population of Israel has been that they are not on the agenda of the Palestinian national movement; their problems are their own and should be solved within the Israeli context (Al-Haj, 2015).

Internal tensions, consisting of the relations of various Palestinian Minority groups with each other, and vis-a-vis with the State of Israel, are also a defining feature of the Palestinians of Israel (Rabinowitz, 1997; Shafir & Peled, 2002). These tensions, rooted in socio-economic differences, as well as different rights and privileges for different groups as controlled by the State of Israel, have also pushed them to the margins of the Israeli society (Al Haj, 2004, 2005). In short, while in theory the rights of the Palestinians of Israel are guaranteed by Knesset legislation, and the Declaration of Independence and court decisions, these minority groups of Israel are discriminated against, whether overtly or covertly, and a wide gap exists between them and the Jewish majority (in favor of the latter) in every conceivable field (Rouhana & Ghanem, 1998; Mazawi, 1994; Dowty & al, 2004).

This broader social context of the various segments that compose the Arab Palestinian community in Israel is important, because as I demonstrate later in this chapter, the mobilization modes and the issues that generated the series of the Praver Plan Protests were directly tied to the complex realities of those communities. By rooting these activists and their movements within their own communities, and by situating them in their broader socio-political context in Israel, we can better comprehend the particular challenges they face, as well as their evolving modes of mobilization within and outside of their communities. As a result, some particular features defining the identity struggle of the Palestinians of Israel: both citizenship and Palestinian national components were also present in the issues that drove them into the streets and the ways they framed their protests.

As the opening episode of this chapter indicated, the issue that sparked the youth mobilizations of the “48ers” in Israel was the relocation of large numbers of Bedouins from the Negev desert in state designated locations within Israel. For this reason, it is analytically meaningful in this section to situate the dynamics of the youth mobilizations of the “48ers” of Israel against the backdrop of the Bedouins’ history in Israel, and their relationship vis-à-vis with the Israeli State Authorities. I would like to specify that while a lengthy discussion on Bedouin land ownership in the Negev desert goes beyond the scope of my study, an account is necessary of how the Law for the Arrangements of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev, commonly referred as the Praver Plan came to exist.

"Bedouin" is derived from the Arabic *badawi*, which can be best translated as "desert-dweller." In his article “The Bedouin Refugees in the Negev”, Rabia, (1994) explains how the term denotes a way of life that was specialized and evolved around

steppe-based herding, but it also refers to a "group identity." Considered as integral to the fabric of the societies in the Middle East, the Bedouin make up 30% of the overall population in the region with their contemporary presence spread throughout Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and Saudi Arabia (Abu-Saad, 1997, 2005; Kedar, 2003, 2004; Shamir, 1996; Yiftachel, 2000 Abu-Rabia, 2002; Sanders, 2010; Kark & Frantzman, 2012). Out of a population of around 7.5 million in Israel, in 2010 there were 193,000 Bedouin, or about 2.5% of the Israeli population.<sup>142</sup>

Over the past 150 years, a series of laws were introduced by various administrations that substantially changed the Bedouin's state of affairs in the region. Of special relevance for the purpose of this study is the introduction of a particular law issued by the British administration and called the Mawat<sup>143</sup> Ordinance of 1921. This law (in turn, an interpretation of a previous Ottoman law) is particularly relevant here because it directly affected the Bedouin in Mandatory Palestine and it also shaped the contemporary Israeli State's policy towards the Bedouin. In a nutshell, a controversial interpretation of this law does not allow registration of unregistered land after this date (1921). Furthermore, most of the Bedouin did not officially lay claim or register their land claims before that date (Falah, 1983; Kark & Frantzman, 2012).

On the basis of this law, the State of Israel denied the status of "village" to all

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<sup>142</sup>IsraelGovernmentEstimate,IsraelLandsAuthority,[http://www.mmi.gov.il/static/HanhalaPirsumim/Beduin\\_information.pdf](http://www.mmi.gov.il/static/HanhalaPirsumim/Beduin_information.pdf) (accessed 14 February 2017).

<sup>143</sup> The term is commonly used and originally borrowed from Legal ottoman. It means "dead".

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Bedouin communities in the pre-1948 Negev; thereby practically classifying all Negev lands as “dead” (Mawat in legal Ottoman) and then declaring them as state-owned. These state claims are strongly contested by other legal analyses (Amara and Yiftachel, 2012; Yiftachel et al., 2014).

According to Rabia (2001), today the Negev Bedouin can be divided into two groups: The Bedouins of the first group, about 86,000, reside in towns planned by the authorities: Rahat, Tel al-Saba' (Tel-Sheva), Ku 'Ar 'ara, Shqeb al-Salam (Segev Shalom), Hura and Laqiya and are considered as recognized villages. The Bedouin of the second group, about 70,000 people, is comprised of those who live outside the seven government built townships in unauthorized locations (known as unrecognized villages).

According to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), the state refuses to provide the Bedouins that live in the unrecognized villages with a planning structure and place under municipal jurisdiction. It also denies basic services such as electricity, water, health clinics, sanitation, roads, public transportation and education. Such non-recognition by the State of Israel of the status of the Bedouins living outside designated locations means that their housing is also considered illegal. For this reason, unrecognized localities and the populations living in them suffer recurring waves of state violence, amounting to about 800 to 1000 house demolitions each year of the period (2010-2013).<sup>144</sup>

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144 Demolition and Eviction of Bedouin Citizens of Israel in the Naqab (Negev) - The Praver Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7589>

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This complex history of land laws, state policies and Bedouin land rights, as enacted and interpreted differently by different administrations over a span of almost two centuries, forms the backdrop for the scope and reach of the Praver Plan in 2010. Praver was the latest attempt by the Israeli government to address this situation and permanently solve the problem of the unrecognized Negev Bedouin communities. For its critics, the plan ignored many Bedouin villages' historic ties to their lands. It deprived Palestinian citizens of Israel from their lands, home and livelihoods, as well as their basic right to determine where to live.

Still, up to this point, substantial literature on this topic confirms that land rights were central to the Bedouin's struggle for equal citizenship within Israel. The Praver protests of 2013, and youth mobilizations of the "48ers" in Israel, marked a significant departure from such strategy. The "48ers" of Israel, born around 1990, protested not as Bedouins or for Bedouin rights specifically. In my interviews with the activists, I was repeatedly reminded, how unlike any other protests, this one brought various Palestinian groups of Israel together. These activists also pointed out how they had led this movement with no permission, guidance or organizational resources from Parties or formal civil society organizations within Israel. In the next section, I focus on how the dynamics of the youth mobilizations played out against the backdrop of the state of political activism for Palestinians of Israel, with a primary focus on 2011.

### **Protesting as 48ers within Israel**

Just as the torrent of the popular uprisings of 2011 was descending rapidly across the Middle East, a stream of laws concerning the political participation of Palestinian

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citizens in Israel was also passed in the Knesset, or Israeli Parliament (Mosawa, 2012, Al Shabaka, 2016). According to a study published in December 2012 by the Mosawa Center (The Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel), the Israeli government had drafted dozens of discriminatory bills aimed at disenfranchising Palestinian citizens through their right to culture, land, politics and more (Mosawa, 2012, pp.5).

Some of these laws were the Anti-Boycott Law and the “Nakba” Law. According to Adalah (The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel):

The Anti-Boycott Law, passed on 11 July 2011, prohibits the public promotion of academic, economic or cultural boycott by Israeli citizens and organizations against Israeli institutions or illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. It enables the filing of civil lawsuits against anyone who calls for boycott; it creates a new “civil wrong” or tort. It also prohibits a person who calls for boycott from participating in any public tender (Adalah, 2011).

According to the same Center, this is what the “Nakba Law” meant:

The law authorizes the Finance Minister to reduce state funding or support to an institution if it holds an activity that rejects the existence of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” or commemorates “Israel’s Independence Day or the day on which the state was established as a day of mourning.” Palestinians traditionally mark Israel’s official Independence Day as a national day of mourning and organize commemorative events. This law deprives Arab citizens of their right to commemorate the Nakba, an integral part of their history (Adalah, 2011).

The passing of these laws, protested by various Arab legal centers in Israel, demonstrate the increasingly constrained political environment for the Palestinians of Israel.<sup>145</sup> The introduction and passing of these laws are brought into this analysis to point

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<sup>145</sup> Mosawa. (2012). The 2013 Israeli Elections: Consequences for the Palestinians Arab Citizens in Israel. Retrieved from [http://www.mossawa.org/uploads/2013%20Israeli%20Elections%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mossawa.org/uploads/2013%20Israeli%20Elections%20(1).pdf)

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out the increased alienation of the young Palestinians of Israel from the Israeli political system. Resistance to such laws revealed another internal force at work that pushed these activists to see their issues no longer as separate, but as common restrictions imposed on them because of their status in Israel, a “Palestinian minority”.<sup>146</sup>

In my interview with the director of the largest youth NGO for the Young Palestinians of Israel, Mr. Nadim Nashif of Baladna concluded that the introduction of these bills severely damaged the ability of Palestinian parties, NGOs, and activists to freely express their opinions and protest Israel’s restrictive state policies, both within and outside of the Green Line. According to him, resistance to these policies shaped the form and content of the protests of the young Palestinians of Israel, including their firmer grasping onto their Palestinian heritage and nationality

One example was on March 15 2011 when the Nakba Law was passed in the Israeli Knesset. This was the same day in which the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank took to the streets to protest political division and demand the unity of the political parties. While youth groups in Israel also took to the streets on March 15 2011, they were opposing something different: The law that prohibited them to remember Nakba as part of their integral history in Israel. Resistance to this particular law may also explain the increased use by the Palestinians of Israel of highly visible Palestinian National symbols, such as flags, keffiyeh etc. during the protests analyzed in this study.

At the very time when the images of the Arab Spring were diffused instantly in a

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146 Al Saafin, L. & Hassan Budur, Y. (2013 September 7) Resist Israel’s unjust system, don’t operate within it. Retrieved from <https://electronicintifada.net/content/resist-israels-unjust-system-dont-operate-within-it/12751>

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world networked by internet, most of my interviewees in Israel concluded that they were using the same digital platforms primarily for two reasons.

First, inspired by these regional events, they were following and supporting various protests taking place in the region. As a result, they forged new connections with activists by expanding their digital networks. Second, in my conversation with various activists, I learned that they traveled extensively in Jordan and Lebanon to receive training and particular advice on how to use social media to mobilize and advocate for a particular issue within their own communities.<sup>147</sup> As a result, the prime way that these activists raised awareness about these laws and the risks it posed for different groups of Palestinians, was through the increased exposure of the Palestinian Youth to social media platforms.

Determining the accurate figures of the percentage of Internet usage amongst the Palestinians of Israel is somewhat complicated. Technically, the data on Internet usage in the different areas of Palestinian residence is scattered between several bodies and split among Israeli and Palestinian service providers. Thus, there is not a single body that is able to provide this data in a unified form. Still, understanding how youth movements of the Palestinians of Israel have evolved and how do they relate to other similar movements in the Palestinian Territories, and to what degree social media has influenced their communication and mobilizing patterns, remains crucial to understand increased awareness about these laws.

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics for 2015, 47% of Palestinians

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<sup>147</sup> Two of the activists that I spoke to, mentioned their training experiences with Ahel, <http://ahel.org/en/what-do-we-offer/> a non-profit based in Jordan in community organizing, campaign coaching.

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of Israel above the age of 20 use the Internet. Over 56.3% of Palestinian households in Israel have a computer, while 74.4% of Palestinian households in Israel are connected to the Internet.

All this data illustrates the significant role of the social media platforms as enablers of alternative platforms through which Palestinian youth of Israel receive their news, express their voice, and engage on newer forms of activism on issues that directly affect their daily lives. This is what one activist said about the role of social media for Palestinian Youth activism in Israel:

For me, before talking about social media as means to strategize and organize protests within Israel, we must above all focus on how social media helped create a sense of awareness – that we: Druse, Muslims, Christians and Bedouins, are all treated unfairly by the State of Israel- simply for being Palestinians. I think that Palestinians of the North had no idea of what was going in the South of Israel, let alone what was going on with Palestinians in East Jerusalem, West Bank or Gaza. For the first, these young “48ers” got their news in their personal social media sites, on their way to school, from their peers, in Gaza or West Bank, or Jerusalem, South or North of Israel. They see the reality not through the TV lenses anymore- but through social media ( Personal Communication, November 20, 2016).

I met Khaled in his office in East Jerusalem in his capacity as co-director at the Grassroots Jerusalem community organization. As illustrated in the quote above, Khaled’s belief that social media helped connect the spread of awareness of the commonality of issues facing different groups of Palestinians of Israel is in line with that of the executive director of Baladna. Both of these NGO activists agreed that increased exposure to social media platform exposed the fragmentations between various groups of Palestinians of Israel, particularly at a time when affiliation of youth in relations to Parties and conventional organizations within Israel had been rapidly decreasing.

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“Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel”, a study published in 2012 by Baladna- Association for Arab Youth in Israel- reported the results of a survey<sup>148</sup> on the basis of which they estimated that only 4% of Palestinian Youth in Israel were associated with Political parties and even less, and 2% with civil society organizations within Israel. The results of Baladna’s report are also in line with another study produced by the Abraham Fund Initiatives and the Friedrich Ebert foundation<sup>149</sup>, who reported a sharp decline in the Palestinian voter participation in Israel. The study revealed a deep level of distrust among Palestinians of Israel toward Israel’s political system and skepticism regarding their ability to influence policy. While dissatisfaction with the government was the main cause for such decline, young Palestinians were also disappointed by their choices for Arab leadership, whom often seem more interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than their day-to-day social problems, such as education and health.<sup>150</sup>

These results are further confirmed by the executive director of Baladna: “Most of the political activities here are led by Parties, which rally youth in their activities or organizations, but there is not much space actually for youth to lead a movement like they did in Praver.” This quote exemplifies the situation of the Palestinians of Israel with regard to their political parties, as similar to those of their Palestinian peers across the Green Line. It points to the general disappointment and decreased affiliation of young

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148 Palestinian Youth Affairs in Israel (2012). Field Research conducted by Baladna: Association for Arab youth in Israel.

149 The Abraham Fund Initiatives. (2015). The Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel. Retrieved from <http://www.abrahamfund.org/webfiles/fck/Election%20Survey%20Full%20Report%20-%20-%20English%20-%20January%202015.pdf>

150 Ben-Amos, Aya (ed.), 2012. Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel – Attitude Survey ahead of the Elections to the Nineteenth Knesset.

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Palestinians with Arab political parties. In my conversation about this particular topic, Khaled told me:

One fact that makes me optimistic is that young people are moving away from their deep affiliations with their Political Parties. The politically unaffiliated are increasing in numbers, and are drawn in other movements outside political parties. While I am not sure how this will play in the long run, I believe that we should celebrate the fact that young people are more aware now about alternative ways of engaging politically. Once away from their family atmosphere, they start to drift away from the political affiliation they grew up to (Personal Communication, November 20, 2016).

Khaled's quote illustrates the potential for the increased masses of unaffiliated youth to move from party affiliated youth activism which prevents young Palestinians from seeing what is common in their political struggle within Israel. Khaled's personal story is an example in case. He identifies himself as a Palestinian Druse of Israel.

Khaled's identification with his Palestinian identity became complete when he publicly refused to enlist in the Israeli Army, and launched the movement "Urfod: Resist, your people will protect you".<sup>151</sup> "Urfod, is my life story and therefore it's a movement that I am committed thoroughly. It is more than a movement about refusing to military conscription in the Israeli Army. It is a movement about the potential of the druse community, flipping its approach, and unifying with the Palestinian political map".

The two major developments that affected the types of protests and mobilizing modes of Palestinians of Israel which were discussed until now are: increased restrictions from the Israeli government on Palestinian youth activism, and increased disappointment of Palestinians of Israel with their Arab political parties. At the nexus of these two quiet

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<sup>151</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/pg/urfod/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/urfod/about/?ref=page_internal)

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but simultaneously evolving developments, we can trace the spontaneous youth protests and the creation of independent youth groups or movements around issues of importance to them. We can also examine their choice to be non-political, and their growing reliance on social media platforms in order to organize and coordinate.

At this time, we see the start of youth groups such as “Jaffa Movement<sup>152</sup>”, “Haifa Movement” and “Galilee Movement”- as open venues to discuss issues that affected young people on a daily basis. Within these movements, we can also see youth from the North and South of Israel, and from different ethnic and religious backgrounds coming together to affect positive change. My interviews with activists from Jaffa, as well as a combined number of 80 blogs, news reports and in depth articles covering the Praver protests<sup>153</sup>, indicate that they were unaffiliated with Parties and acting independently from official political agendas. Following is a brief account of a campaign in 2011, organized by such independent youth movements as an example of ongoing youth protests and mobilizations led by such independent youth networks, which paved the way towards the larger broad-based movement now known as “Stop the Praver Plan”.

### **The Arab Spring and the Palestinians of Israel**

While the hasty winds of the Arab Spring blew briefly in the West Bank and Gaza, in the form of solidarity protests with the Tunisia and Egyptian revolutions and

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152 <https://schwarzenberg.com/tag/jaffa-based-activists/>

153 Balasubramanian, J. & Vaid-Menon, A. (2013, August 19). A new wave of Palestinian Youth Activism in Response to Israeli Praver Plan. Retrieved from <http://www.momken.org/?mod=articles&ID=5693>

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then under the mobilizing banner of the 15 March Movement, scarce attention was paid to similar youth led demonstrations taking place in Jaffa, Haifa and Tel Aviv.<sup>154</sup> In this section, I bring into focus a collection of such seemingly isolated protests and movements taking place within Israel before the Stop the Praver Protests. Taken together, these protests demonstrate that the wave of the Arab Spring was also definitely felt within Israel, highlighting the identity struggle of the “48ers” and heightening their sense of being Palestinian. Often overlooked, these small, scattered protests were indicative of a nascent cross-Green Line Palestinian youth network that preceded the Praver Movement, culminating in 2013.

The Israeli daily *Yedioth Aharnot* (Ynet) reported that several demonstrations took place as the Palestinians of Israel denounced the Mubarak regime.<sup>155</sup> In January 2011, protesters in Tel Aviv held a rally outside the Egyptian embassy, while hundreds demonstrated in the Palestinian village of Kfar Yassif in the Galilee region. In Haifa, dozens of young Palestinians held up Palestinian and Tunisian flags, chanting slogans in support of the Egyptian uprising, while slamming President Mubarak and [Israeli] Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>156</sup>

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154 AlSaafin, L. (2012, March 23). Imperfect revolution: Palestine's 15 March movement one year on. Retrieved from: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/imperfect-revolution-palestines-15-march-movement-one-year/11092>

155 Raved, A. (2011, January 29). Arab Israelis back Egyptian protestors. Retrieved from: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4020862,00.html>

156 Dana, J. (2011, January 29). From Jaffa to Cairo all people power is revolutionary. Retrieved from: <https://972mag.com/from-jaffa-to-cairo-all-people-power-is-revolutionary/9701/>

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In the meantime, another cycle of protests of the young Palestinians of Israel in the wake of the Arab Spring was the 15 March Palestinian Youth movement of 2011. Although on 15 March 2011 joint demonstrations took place by Palestinian Youth in the Haifa and Jaffa, they were largely analyzed as isolated events, with primary focus on Ramallah, while Gaza protests received much less coverage. In addition, the 15 March movement of Israel received less attention than the protests combined between the West Bank and Gaza (Burton; 2015; Maira, 2015 Nabulsi, 2014).

Yet, the active involvement of the “48ers”<sup>157</sup> was not limited to the 15 March movement. A series of campaigns, focusing on issues like prisoners and hunger strikers<sup>158</sup>, were organized by the same core network of activists. Each of the 8 activists I spoke with in Haifa told me directly how they had first met their peers on the other side of the Green Line through coordinating and participating in a series of protests between 2011-2012. Activists from Haifa, Jaffa, Gaza, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron and Bethlehem confirmed that while the coordination of these protests between the ’48 and ’67 Palestinians, happened primarily online, , their emotional bonds were forged in the physical sites of these protests.

It is important to highlight this emerging youth network across the border because my interviewees confirmed with me their high levels of connections with various youth groups beyond the Green Line. In the words of one activist from Wadi Ara,

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157 Omer-Man, M. (2016, February 20). From Haifa to Beirut: 48 Palestinians challenge regional isolation. Retrieved from <https://972mag.com/from-haifa-to-beirut-48-palestinians-challenge-regional-isolation/117210/>

158 Nieuwhof, A. (2011, October 11). Hunger strike movement for Palestine develops rapidly. Retrieved from <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/adri-nieuwhof/hunger-strike-movement-palestine-develops-rapidly>

Northern Israel:

Because of those protests in 2011, the activists here know the same people from Gaza, Ramallah, Hebron. We supported their protests by organizing our own solidarity protests here in Israel. We shared these images via our digital networks. The next time we wanted to organize something here activists from these networks would organize similar protests in their own areas. When you decide to become a political activist, you enter this network and you are part of it- so it becomes easier to organize these protests. You can see how the protests may end, but the connections, the ties between us got stronger (Personal Communication, November 15, 2016).

This quote illustrates how a small core group of Palestinian activist across borders had established a sort of bond and a set of emerging Palestinian issues as a result of this cycle of cross-border protests organized during 2011. A short analysis of one such a protest may be analytically meaningful here because it demonstrates a set of lessons learned during this increased cycle of protests that were put to use in the youth mobilizations against the Praver Plan.

### **Hungry for Freedom: Online and Offline Lessons in political organizing**

I met Majd age 25, in his hometown Haifa, at a lively café, bustling with music and a relaxed atmosphere, filled with mixed sounds of conversations in both languages, Hebrew and Arabic. I connected with him with the help of one of the activists that I had interviewed in Ramallah in the West Bank. This was not the first time for me to draw from the pool of contacts I had built in the West Bank and Gaza to connect with Palestinian activists that lived in Israel. As I mentioned earlier, most of the initial connections between Palestinians on either side of the Green Line were established via social media platforms, while tighter bonds were forged when the "48ers" would travel to

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the West Bank to attend demonstrations and protests at the wake of the Arab Spring.

Majd was one of the main organizers of the “Hungry for Freedom” campaign and later of the “Praver Movement”.

Two major developments had touched Majd’s heart and mind while studying political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 2010 and 2014. The first, he recalls, awakened his courage to protest and sparked his hope that ordinary people can affect positive change. The second event convinced him of the value of social media as an indispensable tool linking many Palestinian Youth groups both inside and outside Israel and Palestine.

The first event was the Arab Spring: the inspirational and hopeful images on the Internet and TV of people occupying town squares and streets, demanding change and a better life from their authoritarian governments and corrupt institutions. He said: “Seeing some of the toughest authoritarian regimes in the region implode like that, it was powerful! I had this sudden realization to fear power no more”.

The second event was the hunger strike by more than 100 Palestinian Prisoners in Israeli jails, which began on September 27, 2011. Hungry for Freedom was a campaign in response to this event. “It is unacceptable that people are starving for their freedom and we do nothing about it”- Majd said to me when explaining why he felt emotionally compelled to do something about it. He met up with about a dozen of his friends from his hometown Haifa, and started talking about visible ways (both online and offline) in which they could support this general hunger strike. Two weeks later, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011, their pictures flooded Palestinian digital networks and social media platforms, both

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personal and organizational.<sup>159</sup> Blindfolded and hands-bound, holding banners with the slogan “Hungry for Freedom”, these activists self-organized and staged solidarity sits-in in the roads of Haifa, Ramallah and Gaza City. The group also relied on their own Facebook page, Twitter feed and blogs.

From the moment that they met, Majd was clear about one advantage of the newly formed group called “Hungry for Freedom<sup>160</sup>”: The participants were not aligned politically with any Party and they would disperse after this campaign. This was, in fact, in line with the formational dynamics of other youth groups at the time, not only in the Palestinian territories and Israel, but also across the region (Al Shabaka, 2012, 2015; Policy Analysis Unit, 2012; Nabulsi, 2014; Burton 2016).

In my interview with Majd, I was struck by his conclusion that being un-affiliated with Parties was an advantage or that by dissolving the group after merely one campaign was intentional. My surprise was partly because his statement contradicted much of the literature I had read on social movements and collective action. Scholars usually have pointed to their lack of organizational support and structure as the reason for the quick dissolution of these movements thereafter (Bayat, 2010, 2014; Ghonim, 2012; Herrera, 2014; Khatib & Lust, 2014). Other activists that I had spoken to also indicated a lack of strategy for what comes after a particular group organizes and successfully leads an online campaign, followed by a street protest.

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<sup>159</sup> Haifa Youth Support Striking Palestinian prisoners (2011, October15). Retrieved from <http://mideastnews-danmike.blogspot.co.il/2011/10/haifa-youth-support-striking.html>

<sup>160</sup> Facebook Status Update: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/Hungry-For-Freedom-للحرية-جائعون-281161825235578/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Hungry-For-Freedom-للحرية-جائعون-281161825235578/about/?ref=page_internal)

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But not in Majd's mind; he had also been present in the 15 March Movement in the West Bank, and had participated in various similar protests in Haifa. He explained to me that in their context, being independent implied opening up a space for expressions around issues that pertained their daily lives, which were not priorities in the Parties ideological agendas. According to him, these issues brought together young people from different groups within the Palestinians of Israel. He also told me that he had understood from previous protests –including the 15 March Movement, that every group that extends its life beyond the goal of the campaign will sooner or later run into conflict with other groups/organizations/parties, and will be crushed. In his own words:

There was an advantage to our insistence to being independent groups, not affiliated with any parties. We learned that being non-political made it easier for us to bring different groups of people together. And being non-confrontational with Parties meant that they did not interfere with our activities as long as we did not side with any particular ideological agenda (Personal Communication, January 15, 2016).

This quote explains how the lack of political affiliations generated the formation of multiple youth groups and increased the diversity of their composition. This strategic approach, according to Majd, accounts for the success of bringing together various similar independent youth groups across Northern and Southern Israel.

When it comes to the effect of social media in this campaign, I was struck by Majd's reflections on its empowering but also limiting capacity in coordinating and mobilizing. Majd was initially very excited and aware about the powerful role of the social media for his generation: to express what is happening in the street, with no filter, from people to people. He told me how creating a FB page and its first campaign "Hungry for Freedom" was a first easy step for him and his 6 other members of the group. The youth

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group, composed of 12 members, published their first call for solidarity with the hunger strikers. Majd recalls how they did everything by themselves, even the T-shirts which they spray-painted black. Some members of the group took over the social media work-including networking with other Palestinian groups. Other groups focused on the logistics of organizing in the street. They deliberately chose public sites for their protests, some of the most prominent streets in Haifa, such as Ben Gurion Street, which is full of trendy cafes and popular restaurants.

Right here at the intersection of online and offline preparations for this campaign, Majd realized the first pitfall of a social media campaign. Despite the fact that the campaign had generated a lot of awareness online, Majd was surprised by the stark reality he discovered on the ground. His participation in this street protest in Haifa shocked him about a different reality – completely different from the political discussions in the Hebrew University campus in East Jerusalem, or from his friend’s network on FB, or from the 15 March demonstrations in Ramallah, where he had personally participated. There in the street, in Haifa, he met people that knew nothing about Palestinian Political prisoners.

On FB you express yourself with ease, you talk about support, you show solidarity, etc. But then you get out on the street. And you realize...people there don’t know anything, they don’t even know who is called a political prisoner and why. So much for the brave history of heroism and patriotic feelings we had shared on FB. But try getting that message in the street! They don’t really care about your patriotic feelings, so you realize that if you really want to talk to them, you need to know how to get their attention, because just national pride itself will not cut it (Personal Communication, January 15, 2016).

This quote of Majd exemplifies the realization of the group of how Social media was great to reach out to people, but primarily to people who believed or already shared

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similar opinions. Online, Hungry for Freedom's initial objective to express solidarity with the Political prisoners in a hunger strike was successfully achieved. Yet offline, the young organizers realized the wide internal divisions within their own society.

Just a few kilometers south of the city of Haifa, lives Maysan age 25, another participant from the Hungry for Freedom protest. When I asked her about her reasons for joining the campaign (she was 21 years old at the time), she shared a quite different story from that of Majd. Maysan told me that her motivation stemmed from her own personal background and life-story.

Being a Druze and joining a group that was campaigning for Palestinian political prisoners, is quite a paradox - It just didn't make sense, neither to Palestinians nor to Israelis. This is a big problem that's keeping us from protesting effectively. So I decided to join (Personal Communication, December 2, 2016).

This quote indicates that Maysan's decision, as a Druze to join a political cause for Palestinians, was a concrete attempt to overcome internal divisions amongst the different communities in Israel. Maysan was born in Isfyah, a Druze village nested on Mount Carmel in Northern Israel. In the previous section of this dissertation, I explained the different minority groups living in Israel, including the Druze population and their relations with the State of Israel. According to her, the Israeli government systematically undermines the cohesiveness of the Palestinian community in Israel, just like it did with the Druze population in 1956, at that time requiring their conscription into the army. As a consequence of the policy, Israel designated the Druze as a national group distinct from the rest of the Palestinian minority.

Now actively involved in campaigns against Druze conscription for military service, Maysan shared with me a vivid memory from her teen-age years. It was an event

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that, according to her, marked the beginning of her quest for identity and belonging in the State of Israel. In 2008, at the time when Israel's Operation Cast Lead was taking place in Gaza, Maysan was in high school. One day, to express her solidarity with the Palestinians of Gaza, she decided to go to school wearing a black and white *keffiyeh*. That day, Maysan was prohibited from stepping inside the school by her school principle because of her scarf. Her peers, other students who called her "a terrorist", also castigated her. "I was shocked," recalls Maysan "This is my village, my people! They know me! How can they call me a terrorist?"

Maysan's sudden realization, as evident in the quote above, was that her action of wearing a Palestinian *keffiyeh* or not, defined her relationship with her fellow friends and within her community. In many ways, Maysan's fight with the school principle became a recurrent theme in her quest for identity and loyalty vis-a-vis the Israeli State and her Palestinian-Arab Identity. "To Israeli Jews, Druze, no matter what they do, no matter how they serve the country, will always be Arabs; and to the rest of the Palestinians, Druze, no matter what they do, will always be traitors."

Maysan's personal struggle and her activism is very much defined and shaped by the characteristics of the Druze community in Israel, and the particular relationships of this group with the Israeli State. Her story serves here to explain her rationale for deciding to participate in "Hungry for Freedom", a campaign that focused on a "non-Druze" cause, such as the Palestinian Political Prisoners.

Likewise, Maysan admitted the influence of the events of the Arab Spring in the actions of the Palestinians of Israel. Still, like Majd, she seemed very clear about the opportunities and the limitations that social media presented for this group of activists:

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I believe in working directly with individuals – yes we can reach a lot of people on social media who like, share and support our activism here in Israel. But mostly these people already think like us, so they are not helping us to reach those that think differently from us. But when you meet individuals from very different groups- and you to talk to them not as an outsider, but make them understand what’s happening, and discover that you are not that much different, despite being from another group, that’s real success for me.

Both Majd and Maysan indicate that the lessons they had learned from their online and offline interactions was how to bridge the gap between online and offline realities and what issues should they rally around to best support this endeavor. Although I met them separately, they both told me that what they had learned from campaigns such as Hungry for Freedom, was how to be more collective, and not to forget the different groups of the Palestinian society in Israel.

The Hungry for Freedom Campaign was presented as a specific example here to demonstrate that a growing network of activists across the Green Line was active in a series of protests during 2011-2012 in Israel. While the online success of this campaign is well documented<sup>161</sup>, the offline experiences of the activists involved directly in this campaign were presented here to explain how and why certain issues resonated better with these youth groups, and to what degree did social media affect their mobilizing and coordinating efforts.

A common conclusion that I gathered from my various interviews across Israel and Palestine is that their national identity and its expression are greatly shaped by living

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<sup>161</sup> Nabulsi, M. (2014) “Hungry for freedom”: Palestine Youth Activism in the Era of Social Media. In L. Herrera & R. Sakr (Eds.), *Wired Citizenship: Youth learning and activism in the Middle East* (pp. 105-120). New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

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in the Jewish State of Israel. As a result, in reacting to Israel's government policies that imposed discriminatory divisions between the Arabs and the Jews in Israel, these young people appeared to grasp even more firmly onto their Palestinian heritage and nationality. While enabling connection across the border, social Media had also exposed the vulnerabilities of these youth groups: Reaching and talking to networks of like-minded people such as themselves across the border. This deeply influenced the extent of the reach of their offline campaigns, where these activists realized the immense barriers dividing different groups of Palestinians living in Israel.

In this context and building on previous protests such as Hungry for Freedom, I turn now to the analysis of the Praver Movement.

### **Stop the Praver Movement**

Maysan received the news of the passing of the Praver Plan into Israeli law via the Twitter Feed on her mobile phone. In her interview with me she explained that for almost two years she had been part of this network of Palestinian youth across borders, called "Together for Change<sup>162</sup>". She told me that, to her, this was not a unique Bedouin challenge which called for Bedouin activism. She did not think that it was enough to mobilize only public advocates of Bedouin land rights issues, legal court files or specialized NGOs on indigenous rights. To her mind, every one who is not Jewish in Israel is threatened by discriminatory policies of the State of Israel, so they should stand up together.

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<sup>162</sup> Retrieved from: <http://palvision.ps/en/project/mit7arkeen/>

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As explained in some earlier sections of this chapter, for Maysan the key to making a protest successful was its broad-based participation by various sections of the Palestinian Arab communities in Israel. To her, Al Arakib was not a unique Bedouin Village. Their house demolitions and status as “unrecognized” was not strictly a Bedouin issue either. Just as I indicated in another part of this chapter, she concluded that the refusal to comply with military conscription of Druze in the Israeli army was not simply a Druze issue, hence a matter for only “Druze activism”. In line with her conviction that state policies towards various groups of the Palestinians of Israel are designed to undermine the cohesiveness of a Palestinian community in Israel, Maysan rejected the notion of a purely “Bedouin struggle” and opted instead to define it as a “Palestinian struggle”:

Listen: The land appropriation, house demolitions, unrecognized villages- are not unique for those of us who live here. They (Israelis) are building settlements on Palestinian lands in the West Bank, while also pushing us out from our historic land here in Israel. They have destroyed so many houses in my village. I see house demolitions happening all over the country on a regular basis. In addition, about 200 Arab houses in my village don't have electricity, because the Israeli Housing Authority does not consider them as legal housing (personal Communication, January 2, 2017).

Maysan's quote indicates her awareness about the similar situation on the ground for various segments of the Palestinian community inside and outside of Israel, and their common predicament. The path that led her to this Palestinian consciousness seemed gradual and characterized by increased personal and online contacts between her peers beyond the Green Line. This is indicated in the creation of a youth group “Together for Change” as an online project uniting youth from the West Bank, Gaza and Israel to discuss and work together on problems facing Palestinian youth. About 250,000 young

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people shared and followed the activities of this group<sup>163</sup>.

This group, as reported by the Association for Arab Youth, Baladna in its 2013-2014 report, with its social media following from Palestinians of all regions, has helped to increase contacts between these various segments of the Palestinian population. Maysan integrated into this lively network of activists, facilitated primarily by the Internet, mobile phones and social media platforms. She maintains that such online ties overcame the geographical divisions between the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, and strengthened their Palestinian nationalistic feeling.

This was evident particularly in the protests she organized and participated in against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. In 2010, coordinating primarily via social media networks, hers and other youth groups in Haifa had been staging solidarity protests with Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. In 2011 she was helping various youth groups in the West Bank with their 15 March Movement, and she was a key organizer and participant of a series of street protests in Haifa, including “Hungry for Freedom”. In 2012, she was one of the key founders of the “Urfod” movement, aimed at refusing Druze military conscription into the Israeli Army.

Maysan’s experiences from her life as an activist serve to explain how her participation in this campaign was not a reaction to the Praver Plan alone. Maysan, Majd, and other activists I spoke to indicate the existence of a growing network of activists, who had organized a number of other protests in the period of 2011-2013,

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163 Baladna, Association for Arab Youth (2014). Annual Activities Report 2013-2014. Retrieved from [https://issuu.com/baladnashbab/docs/interactive\\_report](https://issuu.com/baladnashbab/docs/interactive_report)

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primarily inspired by the Arab Spring. Their combined experiences in various protests across the Palestinian territories laid the groundwork for what turned out to be an impressive youth mobilization of Palestinians of Israel. The Praver bill presented a great opportunity.

In her interview with me, Maysan explained how she and her friends mobilized and coordinated their action in preparation for street protests. Initially, Maysan got directly involved in an online Facebook campaign called: PraverShallnotPass<sup>164</sup>, which called for every Palestinian to join the protests against “The biggest Israeli land grab since 1948<sup>165</sup>”. Next, she led a small group of activists to stage a protest in their own Druze village, determined to tell their community what was going on in the Negev. With a group of friends, she waved a banner that they had quickly created together: “Stop the Praver Plan! Today it is visiting the Negev; tomorrow it will be here. We are in this together!”

In the last week of June and the entire month of July 2013, groups of youth from established networks such as the Haifa Movement, stood at traffic roundabouts, entered cafes and restaurants, and talked to people in the street about what was happening in the Negev<sup>166</sup>. They also distributed leaflets in villages such as Sakhnin, Isfyah, and Wadi Ara. After midnight, they sprayed graffiti on the walls and other visible urban sites in Haifa. This outreach strategy of speaking to communities (both in urban areas and in

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<sup>164</sup> Facebook Status Update: [www.facebook.com/parwershallnotpass](http://www.facebook.com/parwershallnotpass))

<sup>165</sup> Blog Post, Retrieved from: <https://occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/live-blog-stoppraverplan-in-photos/>

<sup>166</sup> Blog Post, Retrieved from Kopty, A. (2013, July 13). July 15th: Anger Strike to stop Praver Plan. Retrieved from <https://abirkopty.wordpress.com/2013/07/13/july-15th-anger-strike-to-stop-praver-plan/>

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villages), making videos, displaying posters, sharing tweets, and posting updates on their Facebook page, demonstrate the grassroots groundwork that these activists did before the actual protests or the “Days of Rage”.

This in-person coordination was also coupled with increased efforts to raise awareness through social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook. Widely shared hashtags, such as #StopPraverPlan; #AngerStrike, spread the news and triggered solidarity among various Palestinian youth networks in the West Bank<sup>167</sup>, Gaza<sup>168</sup>, East Jerusalem and those in the diaspora.<sup>169</sup> In the wake of these instantaneous online youth actions, initiated primarily via social media platforms, several major street protests soon followed.

As a result of such online and offline coordinating efforts, on July 15 and August 1, 2013, thousands of young Palestinian protesters from Southern and Northern Israel took to the streets to demonstrate against the Praver Plan. About 1,000 activists demonstrated in Hura<sup>170</sup>, a Bedouin area in the Negev (Naqab) desert, where many Bedouin villages are located. Simultaneously, a protest in the city of Haifa<sup>171</sup> in Northern Israel took place. Next, the activists moved to Wadi Ara, all across the Upper

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167 <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/linah-alsaafin/palestinian-national-strike-stop-israels-praver-plan-ethnic-cleansing>

168 Palestinians rally in Gaza to stop Praver Plan on International Day of Rage. (2013, December 3). Retrieved from <https://palsolidarity.org/2013/12/photos-palestinians-rally-in-gaza-to-stop-praver-plan-on-international-day-of-rage/>

169 <https://ozcoalitionagainstisraeliapartheid.wordpress.com/2013/11/30/melbourne-against-the-praver-plan-stop-israels-ethnic-cleansing-of-palestinian-bedouin/>

170 Schwarzenberg, H. (2013, November 30). Day of Rage against the Praver plan, Hura. Retrieved from <https://schwarzenberg.com/day-of-rage-against-the-praver-plan-hura/>

171 Schwarzenberg, H. (2013, November 30). Day of Rage against the Praver plan: Yafa, 30.11.2013. Retrieved from <https://schwarzenberg.com/day-of-rage-against-the-praver-plan-yafa-30-11-2013/>

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and Lower Galilee in Northern Israel, spreading the geography of the protest sites as far as southern Tel- Aviv, where they blocked traffic and marched through the streets of the City of Jaffa.

To quell such unexpected uprisings, Israeli police responded swiftly and with excessive force.<sup>172</sup> Online images<sup>173</sup> of the Israeli riot police, Special Forces and Mounties, violently arresting hundreds of activists<sup>174</sup> went viral on various social media networks. In light of such a strong response by the State of Israel, the PraverPlanShallNot Pass group called on their Facebook page for another “Day of Rage” on November 30, 2013.

This time, youth groups from Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem coordinated their actions in a timely manner with the young Palestinians of Israel.<sup>175</sup> As planned, on November 30, 2013, dozens of Palestinians rallied in Gaza City’s Palestine Square, joining a “Day of Rage” against the Praver-Begin Plan. In Ramallah, the West Bank, over 100 Palestinians and international activists took part in the demonstration in solidarity with the Bedouins of the Negev Desert. In East Jerusalem, youth groups

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Viscous crackdown on unarmed protesters against the Praver Plan just outside Ramallah. (2013, December 2). Retrieved from <https://palsolidarity.org/2013/12/viscous-crackdown-on-non-violent-protestors-against-the-praver-plan-just-outside-ramallah/>

173 Abunimah, A. (2013, December 1). Video: Israel police brutalize child amid anti-Praver protests. Retrieved from <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/video-israel-police-brutalize-child-amid-anti-praver-protests>

174 Adalah and ACRI: The Shabak is Trying to Sow Fear among Anti-Praver Plan Activists. (2013, November 28). Retrieved from <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/8224>

175 Kopty, A. (2013, November 24). Schedule of worldwide actions to Stop Praver on Nov. 30th Day of Rage. Retrieved from <https://abirkopty.wordpress.com/2013/11/24/schedule-of-actions-worldwide-to-stop-praver-on-nov-30th-day-of-rage/>

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protested in front of the Damascus Gate of the Old City.

Two weeks later, on December 12, 2013, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government decided to drop the draft of the bill to resettle nearly 30,000 Bedouin living in the Negev.<sup>176</sup> The reasons, as declared by various state actors, were unrelated with these youth led movements of the Palestinians of Israel, which lasted for almost six months. Yet, in light of all formal internal and external efforts to stop the Praver Plan, this spontaneous youth-led movement seemed to have temporarily succeeded in preventing the Israeli government from turning the controversial bill into a law. For the activists involved in the movement they had no doubt that it was their success.<sup>177</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the efforts of Palestinian youth activists in Israel to organize and coordinate the Praver Movement. Seen together as a collection of Palestinian protests in West Bank, Gaza and Israel, these protests fit well in the overall scope of this dissertation: the emergence of networked Palestinian youth movements in the post-Arab Spring context

While tracing the trajectory of this movement within Israel, I have also etched out the particular national and regional conditions that shaped their mobilization modes and motivated the framing of their protests. The Praver protests marked a turning point in the political awareness of Young Palestinians of Israel. It was the first broad-based youth movement that took place outside the controlling structures of the Arab Parties of Israel,

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<sup>176</sup> Berman, L. (2013, December 12). Government shelves Praver Plan on Bedouin settlement. Retrieved from <http://www.timesofisrael.com/government-shelves-praver-plan-on-bedouin-settlement/>

<sup>177</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/withdrawal-praver-plan-bill-major-achievement-palestinians-israel>

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while managing to transcend the fragmentations and internal division between various Palestinian groups of Israel. The movement started off as a matter of Bedouin land rights within Israel. But thanks to a growing network of activists with personal and online ties across the Green Line, it turned into a movement for Palestinian national rights.

In this analysis, I included a series of protests that were organized prior to the culmination of the youth mobilizations of the Palestinians of Israel in the Stop the Praver movement. In 2011 alone, these young Palestinians of Israel had organized street demonstrations in Tel Aviv and Jaffa in January 2011, on 15 March (2011) and the Hungry for Freedom campaign on October 15, 2011. By linking these seemingly isolated events and campaigns in a sustained chain of protests, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, I demonstrate how a nascent-networked movement is taking place outside the controlling structure of the Arab Parties, and the government of Israel.

I have identified the organizers of these movements as a group of activists whose tendency to grasp more tightly to their Palestinian identity seems in part a reaction to contemporary Israeli politics which severely controls and limits their ability to protest and demand their rights as citizens within Israel. Still, as this study shows overall, the ability of these activists to coordinate such massive youth mobilization, despite physical boundaries, geographical barriers and the efforts of the Israeli government to control and crush their actions, is remarkable.

The evolving nature of the mobilizing patterns of Palestinians of Israel include decreased affiliation with Parties and increased reliance on digital networks for coordination and mobilization. These developments are also in line with an emerging mobilizing pattern that I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, while examining

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different protests across different Palestinian geographical areas. Through direct interviews with a dozen Palestinian activists of Israeli citizenship, I have also suggested the potential of a growing network of activists across borders, whose strategic approach and coordination efforts culminated in the successful mobilization of the Praver movement.

## **Chapter Five: General Conclusions**

**"If you disregard people's motives, it becomes much harder to foresee their actions." George Orwell**

This dissertation explored the relationship between digital activism and new youth movements within a Palestinian context marked by territorial fragmentation, Israel's ongoing military occupation and internal Palestinian political divisions in the West Bank and Gaza. I analyzed the intricacies of the online and offline evolution of these newer forms of Palestinian mobilizations through the perspective of lesser-known individuals and grassroots activists who were directly involved in them. Key questions in the intersections between social media, youth activism and major shifting events at the local and regional level were addressed through a bottom-up analysis of a series of protests, led by leaderless and independent youth groups, between 2010-2013 in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel (Hillal 2011; Hoigilt 2013, 2015, ACRPS 2012; NOREF 2013; Maira, 2015, Burton 2017).

A central tension lies at the core of the relationship between these newer forms of Palestinian movements and the overall Palestinian arena of youth activism and political mobilization. The sudden surge of a sustained wave of protests and the tenacious rise of a new group of actors and their new forms of organizing happened at a time when youth studies and polling centers had overwhelmingly announced the massive exit of young Palestinians from politics (Sayre & Botmeh 2010; Dhillon & Yousef, 2011; Khalaf & Khalaf, 2011; Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2011; Hoigilt, 2013, 2015; Dana, 2015; Casati 2016). According to this prevalent narrative of decreased Palestinian youth

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activism in the past decade, young Palestinians appeared as demobilized and depoliticized, trapped in a Palestinian context of internal political schism, multiple wars between Gaza and Israel, the expansion of Israeli settlements and the neo-liberal policies of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Nevertheless, and on the cusp of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, a diverse series of youth protests, spanning from online actions on digital networks or social media platforms to offline protests against Israel's occupation, as well as against repressive Palestinian ruling authorities, spread across the occupied Palestinian territories and even inside of Israel.

With this central paradox as a backdrop, this dissertation asked why and how, in the face of political intimidation, geographic segregations and sheer violence, did these youth groups come together to protest and demand change, as is evident in their sustained chain of protests between 2010-2013? As I have explained in the introduction of this study, my previous work career in the international development and NGO sector in the Middle East region provided my first impetus to dig deeper into the motivations and the predicament that propelled these young people to abandon the safety of their online dissent for the uncertainty of street mobilization. Hardwired from the very beginning of this study was a personal and inevitable curiosity to find out how the organizers of these protests transformed their online emotional calls into courageous street action, what it meant to them to overcome their fear, knowing that they were risking everything and yet still choosing to participate in these protests?

To begin to understand this inquiry more deeply, the chapters of this study drew on a number of important youth protests in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel and their evolution beyond the events of the Arab spring. In the Gaza Strip, I focus on the online

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and offline dynamics of the GYBO (Gaza Youth Breaks Out) youth group. I chronicled its development trajectory from the global ripples caused by the call to action on its Facebook Page, to the sudden burst of the 15 March movement, where thousands of youth took to the streets of Gaza to demand the end of the division between the two main Palestinian parties. I revealed the emotional and political repercussions that this movement experienced afterwards on the daily lives of the founders of this group.

In the West Bank I examined a wave of youth led protests that took place between 2011 and 2013, organized by a youth group called “Palestinians for Dignity” (PFD), and created in the aftermath of the 15 March movement. I depicted the constant search of the activists for a renewed strategy of resistance, and their desire to articulate a new vision for the Palestinian cause.

Inside of Israel, I shed light on the sudden explosion of youth mobilizations of young Palestinian citizens of Israel, as is evident in the “Stop the Praver Movement”- a Palestinian youth movement initiated within Israel that grew cross the border beyond the green line. I focused on their online and offline tactics to spread awareness and overcome their own internal divisions caused by internal dynamics of the different Palestinians groups, vis-à-vis the state of Israel.

Although each chapter presented different trajectories of development for different protests, within the timeline of 2010-2013, my analytical focus in this dissertation remained consistent. I traced the online and offline formational dynamics of these youth groups- their intentions, motivations and actions- as they evolved from the online space of digital networks where they first expressed dissent, to the offline

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challenges of street protests where they demanded change. In the process, I embedded the ups and downs of their movements in their own political and social contexts in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. Simultaneously, I examined their motivations for online and offline action, by intertwining in the narrative of their movements and their personal life stories. Ultimately, I sought to provide a glimpse of the complex realities of the everyday political organizing of these Palestinian youth groups in the age of the Internet.

I argued that the online campaigns and offline protests signal the groundwork of a new and networked Palestinian social movement, developing outside the structures of official parties and formal political organizations. Particularly within a Palestinian context marked by: segregation walls, military checkpoints, and internal political intimidation, social media tools and increased social media literacy among Palestinian youths enabled this collection of protest movements to move from the margins of the Palestinian society, after the Second Intifada, to its center. These movements occur as cycles of confrontations with both the current political systems in the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Often seen as disconnected and short-lived episodes of protests, I demonstrate in this study how a growing network of activists directly involved in these actions ties this new protest movement together.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the findings of my study in these three key areas: 1- the internal and external conditions that determined the transformation of certain actions initiated on digital networks into street protests led by youth groups in Palestine; 2- the degree to which social media, online networks and new forms of activism in this digital age affected the more traditional mobilization modes, as

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implemented by the official Palestinian parties and more conventional party affiliated youth organizations in each separate geographic area; and, 3- The long-term impact of these youth groups and their newer mobilization modes within their society, their current predicament and relations with existing grassroots movements within the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These three dimensions--primary catalysts for online-offline action; the impact of digital activism on the traditional mobilizing modes of formal state and society actors; and the relation of these newer movements to existing Palestinian movements—directly address the three specific questions I posed in the introductory chapter.

In addition to my qualitative fieldwork in the past two years, I will also refer here to the main conclusions I drew from a broad online survey of patterns of Palestinian online engagement. This preliminary survey was important in this dissertation, because it provided a broader framework for understanding the evolution of Palestinian protest movements that I analyze in detail in this study. Comparing and evaluating the findings of my qualitative research used during my fieldwork in 2015-2016, against the broader backdrop of an online survey of about 400 online sources, allows me to highlight some key quantitative findings that confirm certain aspects of my argument, and others that did not.

### **What does this study explain that others have not?**

In this study, I debated with a growing body of studies that tend to analyze the potential impact of these protest movements primarily through the lenses of their connections to organized formal activism on the ground (Beinin & Vairel, 2011; Gelvin, 2012; Ajami; Council on Foreign Relations, 2012; Khatib and Lust 2014; Herrera 2014;

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Hoigilt 2013, 2015). These scholars have focused primarily on the organizational and strategic deficiencies of these newer movements as the main reason for their inability to affect long-term political change. As a result, we know more about why these movements fail, but far less about why do these young activists prefer these loose networks of mobilization, how they might take off and under what conditions they eventually succeed. When talking about these particular activists that switch between online and offline tactics of mobilization, Lust wrote:

The youth groups that triggered these rebellious episodes have not been able to ripen the dividends of their success. Ironically, the reason for this is their preference for largely loose and networked movements... Success depends on their ability to transform into the kinds of actors that many of them (especially newly mobilized youth) despise” (Khatib and Lust 2014, pg16; 67),

It is clear through this quote how the mobilizing patterns of these youth activists have become the litmus test for their political pertinence. However, this conclusion does not take into consideration the primary reasons that propelled these activists to disengage with their political leaders. Below is what one youth activist from Gaza told me when I asked him why he prefers horizontal mobilizing via his digital networks, as opposed to existing political structures:

All these professors, leaders, influential people, they look down on us. They are so fixed on their chairs, positions, functions, that they don't care what we say, where we say it and how. This is the problem. They don't see us. They don't recognize us.

In stark contrast with the previous quote, this one exemplifies the bitter realization of people like Abu Yasan (GYBO) of their complete inability to influence the legitimate political actors and structure. Voices like that of Abu Yasan are consistently muted and aspirations of young individuals like him are not recognized. It is this shared experience

of invisibility that fuels these global alternative networks of engagement.

This particular debate about alternative forms of mobilization undertaken by loose and politically independent youth groups and their relation to existing and more formal social movements brought the period of the Arab Spring protests under microscopic scrutiny. A vast scholarly literature on the popular uprisings of 2011 appeared divided when discussing the role of the new technologies of the communication in these protests.

Central to this divide was the role of the existing political structures, versus the role of the new communications technologies in the start and evolution of the Arab Spring events. The Liberation technology approach explained the sudden explosion of these movements as a direct result of the changed communication environment and media systems in the region (Lynch, 2007, 2012; Howard, 2010; 2013; Mason, 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Howard & Hussain 2013; Diamond & Plattner 2012). Social movement and state and society scholarship highlighted instead their short-lived impact on political change, outweighed by the long-lasting power of the existing political systems and powerful institutions in the region (Gelvin, 2012; Khatib and Lust 2014; Brynen, 2012; Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

In attending to the gaps noticed in these discourses, and based on some new empirical observation, this study also suggests some new answers and theoretical contributions. Empirically, I have included a new collection of Palestinian protests and individual voices previously absent in the overall narrative of the Arab Spring.

Theoretically, I diverged from the dominant social movement analytical framework of

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these newer protests. In the Palestinian context, that meant avoiding scrutinizing these newer movements through the mobilization lenses of collective Palestinian uprisings in 1987 and 2000 (Hilal, 2010; Al Shabaka 2011; Christophersen, Hoigilt & Tiltnes 2011;Hoigilt 2013,2015).

When comparing these newer protest movements with the collective uprisings of the First and Second Intifadas, scholars generated similar conclusions that tended to highlight the organizational deficiencies of the newer movements, their erratic short-lived development and inconsequential impact. Such an emphasis on the youth mobilization modes and collective action in these historic Palestinian popular movements left unexplored the emerging Palestinian mobilizing trends in their contemporary context of social movements in the Internet age.

In analyzing these protests, I drew instead on an emerging scholarship on new social movements in the Internet age (Castells 1996, 2009, 2012, 2015; Mason 2012; Juris, 2008, 2012; Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba, 2012; Postill, 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Chadwick 2013). The theoretical contribution that I bring in this growing body of theoretical discourse is the addition of more social context, and more nuanced individual voices in the interplay between digital networks and these new social movements embedded in their own socio-political contexts. By keeping my focus almost entirely on the formational dynamics of these newer protests, from the perspectives of the people that were involved in them, I also bring more empirical material for the broader understanding of these new movements.

I identified and demonstrated in my research the persistence of key features in these Palestinian protests, as common to new social networked movements, in spite of the

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differences in contexts, goals and demands. These common features relate to the onset of mobilizations primarily on digital networks, and eventually their transformation into street protests. I also described the every-day realities that shaped the primary motivations that propelled these activists to action. It is in these seemingly irrelevant daily events where increased feelings of distrust and cynicism towards their institutionalized actors accumulated and then spread via digital networks. In addition, these Palestinian protests were led by masses of youth, unaffiliated with established political parties and distrustful of their political leadership.

In short, this study has included these Palestinian protests movements not only in the narrative of the Arab Spring, but also positioned them in the expanding arena of ongoing globally networked movements in this digital age.

### **Key Findings**

**I.** Through my case studies I identified a recurrent pattern in the ebbs and flows of these movements from their onset on digital networks to their street mobilization. First, the initial online actions of these youth groups were emotion-driven, expressed and accumulated primarily in the online digital platforms such as Facebook and the Blogosphere. These online emotional expressions were consistently triggered by small events happening in the streets, offices, cafes and other shared public spaces in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. Often, such events are far from developments that indicate major shifts or crises in the relations between the Palestinian parties or in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In my analysis, they appear rather as abrupt episodes that disrupted the daily lives of some young people already living a difficult life. Such

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disruptions were experienced in a deeply personal and dramatic way by some groups of youth across Gaza, the West Bank or Israel.

Secondly, such recurrent and personalized online outbursts happened in tandem with the growing social media literacy by the vast majority of these Palestinian youth groups. Most of these personal emotions of discontent and outrage had been channeled in one particular digital platform or another. Thirdly, the spark of the Arab Spring ignited a Palestinian blogosphere already seething in discontent and anger, and lit a very different fire in the Palestinian context, evident in the 15 March movement in Gaza, the West Bank and even inside Israel.

The story of GYBO was brought as an example in Gaza. The closure of the last independent Palestinian youth NGO by the Hamas authorities triggered an outraged online response by a group of young people in Gaza. Feeling devastated, they reacted by writing an online manifesto, whose reverberations went viral instantly and were spread via global networks of action. Although they faced direct consequences for their online dissent against Hamas, some of GYBO's members went on and became the organizers of the biggest youth mobilizations seen in the streets of Gaza since the Second Intifada. Others opted to drop their association with GYBO.

It is important to point out that while GYBO's online explosion happened on Facebook, some smaller groups and individuals in Gaza and the West Bank were writing poignant blogs aimed at criticizing the current Palestinian leadership and their ongoing political division. To better understand how these shared experiences of discontent resonated emotionally with a broader number of young Palestinians, and how it translated into widespread street mobilizations, we look to a preliminary conclusion that I had

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drawn from a broad online survey that I conducted prior to commencing my fieldwork in Palestine and Israel. Through this survey, I documented how a substantial number of personal stories and feelings of discontent, similar to those of GYBO in Gaza and other groups in the West Bank, for some time now were being cultivated and shared in the Blogosphere.

I first have to explain that my focus on Palestinian blogs was primarily influenced by my previous connections with various youth activists that I had worked with previously in Gaza and the West Bank. However, because the numbers of their blogs were relatively small, I decided to undertake a broader survey of Palestinian engagement online. My study exposed a multiplicity of similar Palestinian youth groups who were experimenting, producing and consuming personalized content in free online spaces-away from the control of their ruling governments.

My initial research included evaluation of about 400 online sources (200 Facebook pages and 200 Blogs of Palestinian youth - mostly in Arabic, but also some in English, reaching an audience of about 400,000 Palestinian users). My primary objective in conducting this significant survey of Palestinian youth-engagement patterns online was to capture how Internet and online social networks had influenced Palestinian social media users in their consumption and production of online content. I also wanted to see whether these online engagement patterns were similar to those of their Arab peers, who used the new digital technologies to effectively organize and mobilize for political change.

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Initially, I tried to categorize the massive content in order to make sense of this chaotic<sup>178</sup> online arena. I found the task nearly impossible. The Palestinian online space seemed to me at the time truly purposeless. I first came up with a rough categorization of the diverse forms of digital expressions that overflowed daily from these free Internet platforms. 1- News and Media; 2- Satirical content; 3- Photography and Photo Journalism; 4- Advocacy on specific Issues and Causes; 5- Sports; 6- Technology and IT fans, etc. Taken together, these sites represented growing and solidifying digital communications networks, as well as the Palestinian youth's growing preferences for non-hierarchical communication forms and free exploration of new ideas.

Upon closer examination, I started noticing some persistent discrepancies between the online content posted by some youth groups on different digital platforms, such as Facebook and in the Blogosphere. On Facebook, I started documenting the characteristics of the online content that young Palestinians were posting, sharing and liking daily. Through videos and pictures, I collected a vivid array of nationalistic imagery and concluded that it indicated pride and a sense of belonging of young Palestinians, their consciousness of a collective Palestinian national identity, and their strong political awareness of their collective resistance for national liberation.

In the blogosphere, however, the online content was in sharp contrast with that of Facebook. The narratives were personal expressions drawn from their daily lives and experiences. I noticed how these bloggers were sharing among one another stories of emotional discontent directed against their authoritarian leaders along with their political structures. Several youth groups or individuals, when posting their own personalized

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<sup>178</sup> On June 2013, "This Week In Palestine", a weekly cultural and historical magazine, broadly distributed in West Bank, dedicated a whole issue to the paradoxes encountered within the Palestinian Society theme, as expressed on the cover title of the magazine: "Palestinian Behavior".

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narratives on their blogs, expressed emotions of humiliation and shame caused in part by the leaders and Parties who had constructed and distributed these youthful and heroic images of collective resistance against the occupying forces of Israel. I wanted to understand what caused this contentious online battleground and also what specific role Facebook and blogosphere played in accentuating and spreading this unrest.

### **Palestinian Blogosphere 2011-2012**

My initial research included 200 blogs, (128 in English, 72 in Arabic). My criteria for selection were the size of the social networks that these bloggers were part of and the number of hits, or views and shares their blogs garnered. All of the bloggers had Facebook pages, twitter accounts, and shared information on networks of between two thousand to ten thousand friends and followers. Their blogs had received 10-30 thousand hits, indicating a strong following. Some of these blogs were picked up and quoted in international media, such as Al Jazeera, The Guardian, Al Monitor<sup>179</sup>, etc.

Through the observation of these blogs, I noticed a pattern in personalized styles of narration. On one hand, they described themselves as grandchildren of refugees, offspring of martyrs, siblings of political prisoners, sons and daughters of the Intifada Generations. On the other hand, they also revealed priorities and goals that deviated from their predecessors. Right there, next to their detailed images and recordings of the memories of their grandparents - filled with peaceful peasants, pastoral lands, heroes that persevere against impossible odds, brave women who stand up to soldiers, I found

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<sup>179</sup> Yasmeen El Khoudary, Abeer al-Shawish, Ola Khadoury are some of the bloggers whose writing often appears in international media.

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different and subversive accounts. In these accounts, these young activists confessed to each other having lost their pride, feeling ashamed of being Palestinians.

In short, the Palestinian Blogosphere was fraught with this constant tension: on one hand, young Palestinians expressed their sense of pride and belonging rooted in feelings of a homeland occupied by Israel. On the other hand, they disclosed their shame or anxiety caused by the political systems that govern their daily lives. Intrinsic to their understanding and referring to their past and future was this tension between these two layers of loyalties. These online social struggles over values that seemed to bind online communities together on one platform, and break them apart on another, were directly tied into the particularity of the Palestinian context, both a nation with no state and young Palestinians living under authoritarian regimes and unjust governance.

My focus on the content discovered through my survey of the Palestinian blogosphere is included in these concluding remarks to pinpoint one side of the pressure in the Palestinian online space, namely, the accumulation of emotions of anger and discontent amongst youth. When juxtaposed with the findings of my qualitative research, I concluded that underneath this online ventilation of resentment in the Palestinian blogosphere, also lay a vast network of like-minded young people who were producing and sharing content expressing this discontent. This online dissent, however fraught with internal tension, became fundamental to the formation of a consciousness by a growing network of young Palestinians, who although predominantly online, were still struggling to define a common set of norms that would bind them together under a new brand of Palestinian youth activism.

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My preliminary findings on blogosphere were in alignment with the conclusions of the Arab spring literature about the extent that blogs and personalized narratives of young Arabs were signals of a growing online counter narrative to the official political one, as represented by the main parties (Lynch 2009; Howard 2013; Cole 2014). Blogosphere made possible the sharing of these personal narratives, which were quietly corroding the public narratives as imposed by their parties.

My findings in my qualitative research through in-depth interviews revealed that the cascading events of the Arab Spring determined the flow and direction of the online actions of young Palestinians. Although there was an ongoing online battle between the “collective” and the “personal” notions of engagements, the narrative of the Arab Spring significantly influenced the Palestinian blogosphere.

**II** The production of Palestinian personalized content in the blogosphere, together with the multiplicity of these lesser known protests, evident in the three in-depth case studies analyzed in my research, give credibility to one of the propositions of this study: That the Palestinian protests are not an exception, but an appropriate addition to the narrative of the Arab Spring.

Unlike some scholarly conclusions, which maintain that there was not a Palestinian Spring (Hillal 2011, Al Shabaka 2011; Hoigilt 2013, 2015), I conclude in this dissertation that there actually was a Palestinian Spring, but one which took a different path due to the unique Palestinian context. Young Palestinians, for the first time in the history of Palestinian youth activism, rose collectively and took to the streets against their own leaders, parties and establishment. The controversial 15 March youth movements,

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which took place simultaneously in Gaza, the West Bank and within Israel, were inspired by the way other young Arabs rose up against their states' corrupt institutions and authoritarian regimes, demanding political change. These mobilizations demonstrated that these youth activists were not sitting on the sidelines, but were in fact at the front line, in solidarity with the demands for change of their Arab peers. The new Arab demands for change left a deep impression in the young Palestinians' hearts and minds, propelling them to break the barrier of fear and assert their role in the Palestinian streets. By turning against their divided leadership, while simultaneously resisting Israel's occupation, they introduced the notion that the Palestinian struggle must be waged on two parallel fronts: internal and external.

The 15 March movement may have not shown a clear political strategy or core vision, but it did reveal what lit the emotions and inspired the shift in the core demands of these youths. It was not the existing political strategies of their Parties, but the new demands of their Arab peers. The Egyptian and Tunisian examples of online dissent and offline mobilizing also enabled them to transform the emotions of fear and humiliation into courage and protest in the street. The 15 March movement did not change or affect the unity of the Parties, but it made clear the intention and commitment of a new group of activists in search of an alternative, more inclusive and inspiring strategy. This foundational strategy, evident in the 15 March movement, rejected the sole emphasis on the occupation over that of authoritarian governance, thus undermining the ability of Palestinian ruling organizations to control and direct these newer forms of youth activism.

**III** I have suggested in this study an ongoing decline in the ability of the Palestinian parties or more formal structures to direct and control the scope of these newer forms of Palestinian youth activism. Through my case studies, I demonstrated a series of youth protests taking place outside of their organizing structure, led by independent youth groups who intentionally bypass formal leadership and prefer to coordinate primarily through digital networks.

While conventional organizations like Hamas and Fatah and other key formal actors in the Palestinian context relied heavily on rigid organizational structures and top-down modes of mobilization, the young Palestinians I studied preferred loosely coordinated actions facilitated primarily online, far from those formal Palestinian actors. The cases of GYBO, PFD and Hungry for Freedom revealed in detail how members of these youth groups were connected online with like-minded peers across the West Bank and Gaza, and managed to bypass the censorship and top-down authoritarian organizations of the main Palestinian factions.

The ability of some Palestinian groups to pull off impressive youth mobilizations, outside the organizational structures of official parties and formal organizations with large resources, became publicly visible in the aftermath of the 15 March movement, where young independent Palestinians rose up in protest against the ongoing bitter political rivalry between Fatah and Hamas. In response, both Parties used similar tactics to infiltrate, coopt and arrest the crowds of youth, demonstrating the common repressive nature of political systems in both the West Bank and Gaza. While the parties were able to largely contain these movements, they were not able to completely stop the flow or the direction of the subsequent protests.

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The ways in which these new forms of Palestinian youth activism in this digital age affected the more traditional mobilization modes, as implemented by official parties and conventional organizations, are directly tied to the ongoing debate over the role of the digital networks for organizing, mobilizing and achieving political change.

The fundamental characteristics of the new communication technologies, with their most important functions of personalizing and sharing, enabled the GYBO, PFD and “Stop The Praver” movement activists to shake up the practice of “communication as usual” by parties and NGOs. Young Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank and inside of Israel occupied this medium and created personalized messages as individuals fed up with the hierarchies of their political structures and the public narratives imposed by their leaders. This significant shift in the communication patterns enabled alternative youth mobilizations in the form of online and offline cycles of protests. Because of the new technologies, these Palestinian youths were able to overcome their geographic separations and organize protests that were previously out of their reach and could not be orchestrated outside of traditional organizational structures.

The case of the PFD in the West Bank, and the way its members were able to share content and information about their actions instantly and raise awareness about their protests through their ties with global networks of action, is another case in point. I have described here how territorial fragmentation, military borders, and internal political divisions marked the Palestinians’ everyday experience. Yet, coordination and exposure through social media played a crucial role in allowing youth to overcome these obstacles and organize these impressive youth mobilizations across borders. Moreover, the “Stop the Praver Plan” movement in Israel was also coordinated primarily online through

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digital networks indicating the growing influence of a network of activists who were able to expand, maintain, and strengthen ties across borders between Israel and Palestine.

**IV** Often these youth groups have been criticized for their inability to move from a series of protests into a massive sustained organized movement with potential to have tangible influence on the Palestinian socio-political landscape. The question of the long-term impact of these new forms of social movements in this digital age was brought here as an issue of broader theoretical importance. To address this, I examined the actual impact of the protests of these joined networks in two ways: (a) the effect that they had on the personal lives of the youth and their formation and evolution as activists, and (b) the effect on the relationships of these groups with existing grassroots movements within Palestinian society. The findings here are particularly important because they tie directly into my overall argument of the multiplicity of movements growing outside of formal parties and political organizations.

My interviews with seasoned Palestinian activists<sup>180</sup> of non-violent popular resistance and pioneers of the First or Second Intifadas, indicated that some of the newer groups of activists have in fact connected and aligned strategically with older existing grassroots movements on the ground. The activists of the PFD in particular were active participants in the activities of the Stop the Wall campaign, which co-ordinates grassroots and non-violent demonstrations against the Israeli construction of the separation barrier and land confiscation in the West Bank. The Stop the Wall movement, otherwise known as the “popular resistance,” is a loosely coordinated effort that has maintained what has

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<sup>180</sup> I had a series of interviews with eminent activists such as Bassem Tamimi, Ali Abu Awad; Sami Awad, Mazen Qumsyeh, Isa Amro, Huwaida Arraf etc.

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arguably been the only form of active and organized resistance to the Israeli presence in the West Bank since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005.

Another link that PFD developed with these grassroots committees was through their weekly demonstration in the Nabi Saleh protests against the expansion of settlements in the West Bank. Finally, a last example of the alignments of these groups with other broader networks of actions is their connections to the BDS movement. In the West Bank chapter, I indicated how the Freedom Rides campaign was utilized by the BDS movement to push for divestment by Veolia - the French company that, at the time, provided bus transportation for settlers in the West Bank.

The case of PFD and the youth-led protests at the time marked a new phase of linking between the emerging group of actors who initiated their actions through online social networks and other existing decentralized grassroots activism, led by popular resistance committees across the West Bank. From their interaction with these other grassroots movements, youth groups also strengthened their links to broader Palestinian society by building intercommunity trust and by joining together in street protests. This enhanced mobilizing strategy significantly contributed to popular non-violent resistance efforts which have been occurring over the years in the West Bank.

I also examined whether the newer mobilizing forms of these youth groups affected these more traditional ongoing popular movements within Palestinian society. In my interviews with some eminent activists from the First and Second Intifadas, leaders of West Bank grassroots movements described some of the gains that had resulted from the linking of popular resistance with the efforts of these youth groups. One of these gains

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was a surge of creativity in the repertoire of Palestinian non-violent resistance because of these young people and their ideas for protests.

As a result of the constant renewal and shift between online and offline tactics, and the social media links that these youth groups brought with them, some grassroots movements in the West Bank received more attention in the form of international media coverage and global online exposure. The examples brought in my study were the Nabi Saleh protests and the “Bab al Shams” campaign and the “Stop the Prayer” movement within Israel.

Another novelty that these youth groups introduced through their protests was an element of spontaneity and surprise, which often caught both Israeli and Palestinian authorities off guard. A direct consequence of such an approach is evident in their strategy of switching targets of protest between the PA and Israel, as seen in the systematic chain of protests that the Palestinians for Dignity organized between 2011 and 2013. This type of fluctuation in protests and unpredictability in targeting inhibited the ability of the PA and Israeli authorities to control or permanently stop these types of mobilization by the youth groups.

I also discussed with these youth activists and more traditional grassroots leaders the prevalent conclusions of scholars and analysts about how critical it is for youth groups to align with powerful institutional actors. While they appeared very aware of the criticism, and somewhat concerned and uncertain, they mentioned that the point often missing in such analysis is the perspective of these activists about why they choose to remain apart, instead of falling in line behind one party or another. They are dissatisfied with the feeling of being caught in the ongoing “old guard” insistence that “you're either

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with us or against us”. In short, from the perspective of these young activists, the trust in their Parties was lost the moment it became clear to them that they could no longer change them. My research shows that Palestinian youths possess a strong desire to have a voice in the shaping of their present and future. This is why the youths strongly demanded the political unity between the two main Palestinian factions. Until now, this demand has gone unacknowledged by their parties, and this is reflected in the dissipation of the emotional bonds and affinity of the youths to their parties. Here is what one key-leader said to me about the conclusions generated about their movements:

Every one was obsessed with our mistakes. The political leaders said: “Oh, what is it that they want exactly? And what are these protests and what is their effect on the ground? This is useless!” And the Western media said: “they should do X and follow that path like Martin Luther King.” The academics said: “they need to define a goal. They don’t have a strategy”. Everyone suggested a recipe! But really, everything new we learned was by ourselves and thanks to our “mistakes (Personal Communication, October 22, 2015).

I bring this quote here to indicate the impact of these protests on the activists themselves. More than convincing their parties or their society, these loosely coordinated youth groups were able to convince above all themselves about their power to organize outside the existing mobilizing structures of large organizations possessing broad resources. My case studies demonstrated that with the right fusion of an innovative idea for action, the right social tool for spreading awareness, and the initial cohesion of a small collection of activists, they were able to achieve massive youth mobilizations, which were previously only possible within the reach of the organizational structures such as their parties or social movement organizations.

**What does this withdrawal of youth activists from formal sites of mobilizations, like those of Fatah and Hamas entail? Are the Palestinian parties now finished?**

I now move to some anomalies that my study discovered but could not thoroughly explain. Such inconclusive results are worth mentioning here because they may suggest further areas of research. Having exposed a rupture between the mobilizing forms of the youth groups analysed in this study, I also want to stress that the point of my study is not at all to conclude that the hold of the traditional Palestinian parties on the Palestinian society is over. I will bring here some additional findings that I describe in the chapters of my study- as part of the ongoing dynamics that these movements face in their evolution.

The sudden youth mobilization of the 15 March movement indicated not only an emerging group of young activists who shed their political affiliations. Its immediate results also revealed how deeply entrenched the Palestinian parties are in the fabric of the Palestinian society. On one hand, the expectation that one is either with one political faction or with the other, made these youth groups appear weak or unimportant to various groups within Palestinian society. On the other hand, the parties were constantly trying to put “sticks in their wheels” to upend progress by a series of tactics exposed in this study such as: infiltrating the movements from within by youth affiliated with the parties, targeting specific individuals in these youth groups and particularly the reputation of female members.

Most of the activists I interviewed shared with me how much more energy they had to spend simply to keep their nascent movements together in trying to resist these constant efforts to undermine them, rather than thinking about the way ahead. As a result, the idea to create a new movement to unite everybody, completely independent

from the Palestinian Authority or any political faction, seemed idealistic at best and utterly futile at worst.

In addition, the fact that some members of these youth groups had previously been members of Party affiliated youth organizations meant they had prior experience with activism rooted in the structures of the parties. Because of this, they were acutely aware of how deeply entrenched political affiliations are within Palestinian society. Through their personal life stories covered in my study, I have consistently described how hard it has proven for these activists to escape the factional labels assigned to them based on their own families' perceived political affiliations. This significantly restricted young activists' ability to act independently in a sustained or formal way.

One example of the depth of the political affiliations in Palestinian society are on display at Palestinian universities, where student organizations strongly aligned with each of the parties create a highly politicized environment. Here I also pointed out several discrepancies between impressive and enthusiastic student elections within the university campuses, which indicate highly politically affiliated youth and the paradox of the recurrence of the youth protests I studied, which take place outside of the university campuses, disconnected from these party-affiliated student organizations.

Additionally, other studies have also concluded that university elections do not really translate into political loyalties of the students towards the respective parties (Casati, 2016). Behind the façade of high student voter turnout lies a distrustful body of Palestinian students, aware of pre-selected groups of students being groomed for future political careers in one party or another – with the rest being left aside. This suspicion came out in my interviews with student activists and most concluded that there is no

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room to grow as political activists in the current student political organizations at the universities. In fact, even among student politicians there is a palpable sense of resignation about the inability to exert political influence, notwithstanding the fervent activity connected with student elections each spring semester.

Despite the focus of this study on newer forms of activism generally taking place outside of university campuses, I have also indicated what a major challenge it is for Palestinian youth activists to mobilize students en masse in a sustained manner from within these universities, as what happened before and during the First Intifada. The main reason for this seems to be the inability of these emerging youth movements to break the wall of fear that stands between the majority of young Palestinians and street political protests. The “fear of the political” was clear in each of the case studies highlighted in this study. These youth groups operate in a political environment where they face direct sanctions from Hamas, the PA and the Government of Israel for every movement that shows promise of developing into an alternative to that of the Post-Oslo political frameworks.

This tension between the “official political”, as represented by the deep influence of the main parties in the Palestinian society, and the “personal political”, as represented by their choices for activism of these youth groups away from these parties, mirrored the deep tension that I had also discovered in the online Palestinian space. Through the analysis of online content posted on about 200 Facebook pages, I was able to catch a glimpse of patterns of a particular resistance model- a collective online resistance from young Palestinians whose loyalty and love goes first and foremost to “Palestine”.

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Following is an example: “To be a Palestinian is to be a revolutionary, born to struggle for all our grandparents possessed: their keys and their faith in our just cause”.

This is what Muhammad S, 22 years old, from the West Bank wrote as a comment on a picture shared on his personal Facebook page. The picture featured the silhouette of a young Palestinian man, with his head and face wrapped in the iconic black and white checkered Palestinian *Keffiyeh*. Both of his legs slightly bent in the air, he is throwing a stone over a tall concrete wall topped with barbed wire. This picture was shared 550 times and hundreds of his Facebook network friends had *liked* it. Thousands of similar images visually occupy Muhammad’s and the streams of hundreds of other personal Facebook pages of Palestinian youth. All depict youthful heroism, with an emphasis on the Palestinian struggle for liberation and resistance to Israeli occupation. Accompanying comments like Muhammad’s seemed to indicate strong political awareness and solid understanding of who these youth are, where they come from, and what they want to achieve. I was personally moved by the liberating emotions of pride and solidarity that burst through their words. Then I accidentally ran into Muhammad’s blog and read a much longer, personalized narrative of his account of the March 15, 2011 youth demonstration. Although equally gripping and sharply articulated, this time I was stunned by the completely different emotions that pierced his other account:

Where are the Palestinians?!” gnashing my teeth, I asked myself time and again. Brought up with the heroic images, scenes, anecdotes, and music of the First and Second Intifada, for a moment, I felt ashamed of myself - being a Palestinian. I lost that pride.

It was this initial paradox that prompted me to explore the conditions under which young Palestinians used certain digital platforms like Facebook to expand calls for

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solidarity with the Palestinian cause, as represented by their parties and other platforms such as blogs, to express their political dissent against the same leaders.

I will briefly engage with the findings of my online survey regarding the use of Facebook as the other digital platform on which Palestinian youth were highly engaged. From the digital imagery highly shared and liked in these Palestinian Facebook platforms, I had concluded that the personalized Palestinian Facebook pages served also as a collective platform for the promotion of a coherent Palestinian identity now fashioned digitally, using existing conventionally brokered models of activism and resistance.

Through this digital imagery, young Palestinians demonstrated affinity to the values that these pictures represented. Among others, in their comments they expressed a sense of belonging and pride that takes into account established traditions, customs, and modes of living in attempts to preserve it as part of their identity and as a form of resistance to the occupation. They embrace the heroic and youthful images of Palestinian Youth as the drivers of collective resistance against Israel's occupation. These pictures, videos and short quotes around them endorsed the view that the youth that share and comment passionately on these pictures within Facebook were highly politicized. They were able to interpret, explain and inform the purpose, utility, legitimacy and urgency of each picture, showing great political and cultural knowledge. These systems of meanings, imparted to them by their grandparents and parents, seemed to translate into clear political aspirations.

What do such performances of allegiances work to secure online? All this visual evidence expressed a desire to re-inscribe the consciousness of a national identity in the

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online space. Seen together, these Facebook narratives attempted to present and preserve online a national identity constructed primarily by institutionalized organizations and political parties, such as the PLO, which gave this narrative of events its final shape and used it as a tool in the mobilization of the Palestinian people (Migdal & Kimmerling, 2003; Rashidi, 2008; Sabbagh 1997).

This online collective imagery continues to enable stateless Palestinians to present publicly their enormous efforts to resist Israel's occupation and to maintain their national identity<sup>181</sup> against such impossible odds. This is why in my online survey research I argued that by using multiple digital media platforms to convey two seemingly exclusive positions, these youths were forging new models of resistance. This model accommodates contradictory positions and presents them as interrelated. Through the symbolic and political allegiance to the Palestinian cause, they define their identities in the face of Israeli Occupation and other external political actors that deny their political and cultural existence. By contrast, through their counter-narrative resistance to the official political, they nurture personalized modes of expressions which translate into new forms of activism.

Perhaps through this finding we can also begin to understand the contradiction I discovered through my own empirical observations - the disengagement with the parties on one hand, but the solidarity with them under certain circumstances on the other hand. This ongoing paradox of simultaneous online and offline allegiances is thus deeply rooted in the particularities of the Palestinian context as a nation without a state. The quest to understand why certain calls for political actions expand certain solidarity networks and

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181 Khalidi, pg.223

deflate some others, should definitely take into consideration the ways these youth activists negotiate and accommodate between these two intertwined layers of alliances and loyalties.

I present these conclusions here because I do not want to suggest that the hold of these parties on their youth is over. Instead, I want to emphasise that the sustained cycle of protests that I analyzed present a serious alternative to the traditional forms for protesting and mobilizing, as represented solely by parties within a Palestinian context. While these parties continue to have significant power, I have demonstrated that their capacity to draw on these newer forms of mobilizations is significantly weakening. As more advanced alternatives for individual and group action arise, this may pose a serious problem for the mass-mobilizing capacities of these powerful formal actors in the future.

### **What did these new youth movements accomplish?**

What did these types of movements accomplish within the Palestinian context? This question is especially important when trying to determine the broader explanatory value of this study. Did they fundamentally change the internal relations between the two parties? Did they dramatically reshape the Palestinians' relations with Israel and the rest of the world? What is the alternative to the decaying political institutions in Palestine represented by the authorities in Gaza and the West Bank and the formal political organizations such as the PFLP, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas and Fatah?

This study has found some answers to these questions, while leaving other questions for further research. The persistence and success of the sustained chain of

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protest movements, led by these leaderless youth groups, demonstrate first and foremost a group of young people not sitting on the sidelines as described by party leaders, but in actuality, sitting right on the very frontlines of a growing movement. My case studies demonstrate the growing influence of a network of young Palestinians, born around the historical period of the Oslo Accords, as well as their persistent efforts to have their voice heard and to make their ideas count. These new forms of protests, facilitated primarily via social media, provided a grassroots alternative to the top-down activities organized by the Palestinian political parties and the PA.

A common theme of this movement is a search for a renewed strategy of popular resistance against the Israeli Occupation, which seeks to rebuild community trust and empower leaders of a variety of forms or movements on the ground, as opposed to traditional leaders sitting in their offices. Due to increased authoritarianism and in the face of ongoing occupation, their lessons learned are: to not become a fixed body, a political party or an NGO, but rather to stay loosely organized with the goal of remaining in touch with Palestinian society while avoiding power struggles with their parties.

The youth groups that I have analyzed in this study have a different vision for the Palestinian cause of national liberation. Seen through their protests, this vision consists of several core demands. The first one is for national unity, as evident in the 15 March movement in the West Bank, Gaza, and to a lesser degree inside of Israel. The second demand, evident in their protests against the PA, was an end to coordination and dialogue with Israeli authorities, or an end to normalization of relations with Israel as an occupying power. The third demand is a renewed, representative national leadership in the form of revived Palestinian National Council.

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Another common theme of these movements is the commitment of the activists to an un-armed, or non-violent approach, building on what is commonly known among Palestinians as the popular resistance. I have to point out here that based on my interviews with the activists, that this choice is not necessarily informed by a particular non-violent ideology, but rather by necessity.

What these networks have done so far is to filter small successes from a series of impressive protests, while continuing to innovate and stay active. They have also suggested a way forward which involves cycles of confrontation on many different fronts. I have pointed out in this study the risk of overlooking these emergent movements within the Palestinian society. The questions of strategy, short or long term political goals, and generally viable ways to measure the impact and effectiveness of these emerging networked movements on a broad scale should not override the lasting impact that these protests had on these activists themselves, and the ongoing potential of newly forged personal connections and meaningful organizing skills that could be harnessed with the right spark.

Observing the formational dynamics of these newer movements, even within the larger background of the Palestinian-Israeli field is important. What is happening in these Palestinian cities and villages may appear disconnected or as isolated episodes of protests on the surface; yet, when studied more deeply, all of these various initiatives are intertwined. These silent, yet growing movements, may provide a loose framework of action with the ability to set many factors into motion at the right time. While policy makers, academics and political pundits point repeatedly at the absence of a unified body to lead these movements, I emphasize the growing presence of a network, however loose,

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that binds these movements on the ground and seeks - not to control their evolution on the ground - but to empower it.

From my empirical observation of these activists, along with qualitative methods of observation and the in-depth research on Palestinian patterns of online engagement, I have come to understand that political change within a Palestinian context may result from **various** movements working together, to bring lasting change on the basis of a renewed vision and alternative answer to the Palestinian question

### **Final thoughts**

Providing human context while exploring the formational dynamics of these newer forms of movements was essential in this study. There is substantial analysis and research on major developments that have affected the past and present shifts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian youth activism, and Palestinian popular resistance and grassroots movements. However, the perspectives of these young Palestinians are often mentioned in these studies only as an afterthought. Bringing into the body of this analysis the voices and experiences of young Palestinians, who do not normally make it into the news or broader scholarly analysis on the subject of Palestine and Israel, I believe is a valid contribution.

I have tried to make sense of the individual actions of young people, born around the time of the Oslo Accords, whose lives were primarily shaped by political frameworks of the Post-Oslo period, but whose political consciousness was fundamentally influenced by the events of the Arab Spring. In addition, their preference for largely horizontal and

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networked protests were primarily shaped by the characteristics of the new communication technologies.

By exposing the split between these newer protests and more traditional forms of collective engagement, I also suggested another indirect contribution that these protests generated in the rich history of the Palestinian youth activism: the return of the Palestinian youth to the streets, despite ups and downs, errors in strategic calculations and groups' endurance, trials and imperfections. The youth presence in the streets of Gaza, the West Bank and inside Israel has resulted in a renewed spirit of community organizing and resistance that the parties have undermined. These protests revealed an ongoing process of experimentation, always subject to adaptation and evolution.

I have also focused on the importance of the motivations that prompted the individuals who were directly involved in these protests. At times, some of them made the choice to participate in these protests as a direct response to the immediate pressures of the moment. When intimidated or directly threatened by the Palestinian ruling authorities or Israel's military forces, they abandoned these groups or switched their course of action. Each tried repeatedly to make the best of difficult situations in hard times of political repression and military violence. At other times, other activists who participated in these protests did so as part of conscious movements. I have brought into this analysis evidence of integration among these seemingly isolated events through their continued engagement in a long and sustained series of protests from 2011-2013.

This study did not focus as much on the likelihoods of failure that emerge from online and offline activism. Many other studies have already done that. In seeking to

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highlight the formational dynamics through a number of successful protests movements of these newer forms of movements, I wanted to point out how these online and offline campaigns enabled the accumulation and integration of the multiple efforts of young people who contributed their own ideas in support of issues that resonated emotionally with them. These ideas did not need to be sought out for approval from higher or deeper chains of command. Some of them took off in the form of impressive youth mobilizations and others died out. Moreover, while no one knew from the very beginning which of these ideas would succeed or which would fail, the tenacity of these young individuals to keep trying nevertheless is remarkable. Ultimately, the real liberating truth that these activists learned on their own, in the streets of Gaza, the West Bank and even inside of Israel, was the self-realization and renewed confidence in their ability to move things forward without the need for acceptance or approval from the powers that be.

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